

play



Mean green!

We get our hands
on The Hulk

Are games too easy?

14 developers speak
their minds

First looks

Medal of Honor:

Rising Sun

Kya: Dark Lineage

Onimusha 3

Black 9

XGRA

Jak II

World Exclusive

VOODOO VINCE

His pain is your gain



Behind the small screen

Majesco's Iridion II

Sonic Team's latest

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg

The magic of Miyazaki

Spirited Away, Castle in the Sky

Knockin' on Heaven's door

Cowboy Bebop: The Movie

Final Fantasy Origins

Freaky Fliers

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PlayStation 2



Violence

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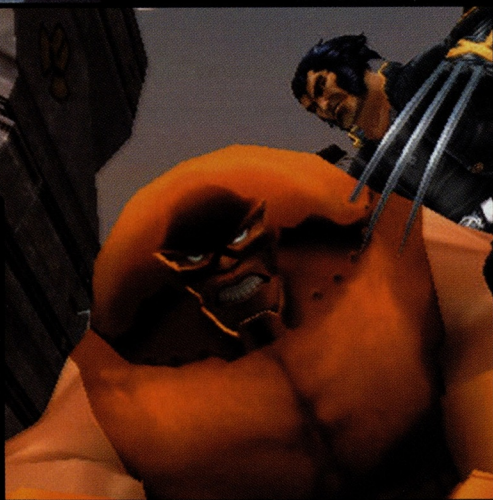
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PlayStation 2



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Would you like to play a game?

As this issue goes to press, we are at war, and whether you're for it or against it, you've got to give it up for the people who put it all on the line for what we believe in, in this sometimes confused but always amazing country of ours. God speed to them on their very real mission. We have many loyal readers in the armed services and we look forward to their safe return, so they can commence Operation: Kicking Our Butts At SO-COM. We look forward to putting **play** on the first newsstand in free Iraq.

Meanwhile, some great things are happening here at **play**, like having an actual bona fide world exclusive on the cover. The first time anyone sees or reads anything about Voodoo Vince will be on the cover of this issue—no internet, no nada. This is how potential franchises are supposed to be launched—in the press, at supermarkets, on newsstands, at game stores and in bookstores. It's nice to know that a print exclusive is still possible in a time where new game announcements are beamed to anyone with a URL before the first shot is fired, which usually equates to a handful of "approved screens" rationed between every magazine and web site on the planet, making a given debut about as exciting as raising Sea Monkeys. Perhaps a trend is...nah. How many games are kept a complete secret for two years and then launched on a magazine cover prior to even a press release? Exactly...zero. Our sincere thanks to Edelman Worldwide (Xbox PR) and Beep Industries for making it happen (I knew all those critter covers would pay off someday!).

Meanwhile, we're staring down the barrel of another E3. I guess it doesn't matter that we're still recovering from last year's show, because the parade has already started. We've received so many E3 press CDs, our FedEx guy is asking us for hazard pay. Early indicators show that Nintendo is going to be the big surprise this year, although we're not sure yet why. Our guess is that a new Zelda—akin to the early, more realistic-looking Link that preceded the GameCube launch (much to our chagrin...we like the new guy)—may be among

the surprises, along with a new Mario and perhaps a new franchise player altogether. Rumors of a GameCube-exclusive Metal Gear are also circulating—which puts a big exclamation point over our heads—and it's anyone's guess what Retro has in store...a third-person Metroid perhaps? And what about Donkey Kong? Will Nintendo finally roll out a new 3D version? Or did Rare's exit stage left shock the monkey?

Ratchet & Clank 2 and Jak 2 will be among the heavy hitters for Sony, but they're keeping a tight lid on any other potential surprises; although we have been told that Sly Cooper will not ride again, which came as quite a shock. Our advice to the über-talented Sucker Punch is to take raccoon in arm and head for the green light over at Microsoft. I'm sure they'd love to have him. Speaking of Microsoft, they're said to be sitting on a powder keg of AAA first party titles lead by Halo 2, Voodoo Vince, Psychonauts and Sudeki. But what of a Blinx sequel? Was Blinx on life nine, or will Ohshima suck it up and try again to achieve the mass-market status his hedgehog enjoyed? Our hope is on the latter. Elsewhere, Tork will have hopefully found a home, the new PS2 Castlevania will be on display, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic will be playable for the first time, Capcom's Maximo: The Army of Zin will make its debut and Tak and the Power of JuJu will attempt to enter THQ into the platforming race. And that's just the obvious stuff. The real mega-shocks always hit you on that first lap around the show floor, after which I'm ready to get the hell out of LA. Can't they move this thing to a city where I don't have to wear Kevlar in my hotel room? Let's go back to Vegas! They have sweet arcades!

And finally, you'll notice on page 59 we're offering some cash money to take part in our reader survey. I know these things are a bit of a pain, but I implore you to take part. This is the final step in molding **play** to your specs and showing our advertisers that you guys really are the heart and soul of the industry, so we would be most grateful. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to feed my Sea Monkeys.

"It's nice to know that a print exclusive is still possible."



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play magazine

05 / 03

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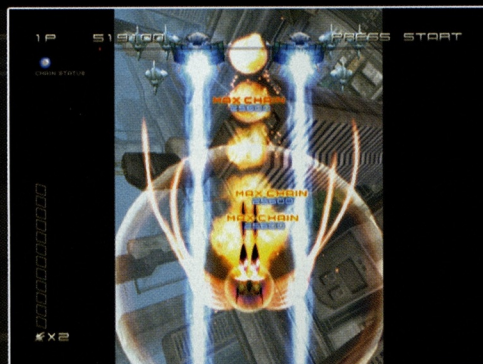
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ATARI



cover story Voodoo Vince

Something very special is brewing over at Beep Industries. Check out our world exclusive first look on page 20



038 The Hulk

"Hulk works as an extension of the film, meant to further the experience after you leave the theatre, charged, wanting to rip things from the ground and use them as bats."

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Readers sound off on the difficulty (or lack thereof) of modern games and beg for a Japanese section in **play** magazine.

012 ink

Sonic Team reveals their latest original creation, and The Italian Job comes to the big and small screen. Also, a new Mode 7 comic

030 game previews

See first screens of Capcom's Onimusha 3, Atari's Kya: Dark Lineage, Ubi Soft's XIII, Acclaim's XGRA, and much more

060 game reviews

Check out our all-new reviews section, and get our final verdict on Sony's amazing Primal. And don't miss FF Origins and Midnight Club 2

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068 gear

Sony debuts stunning new plasma display and we look at Alienware's new living room PC and Palm's latest and greatest PDA

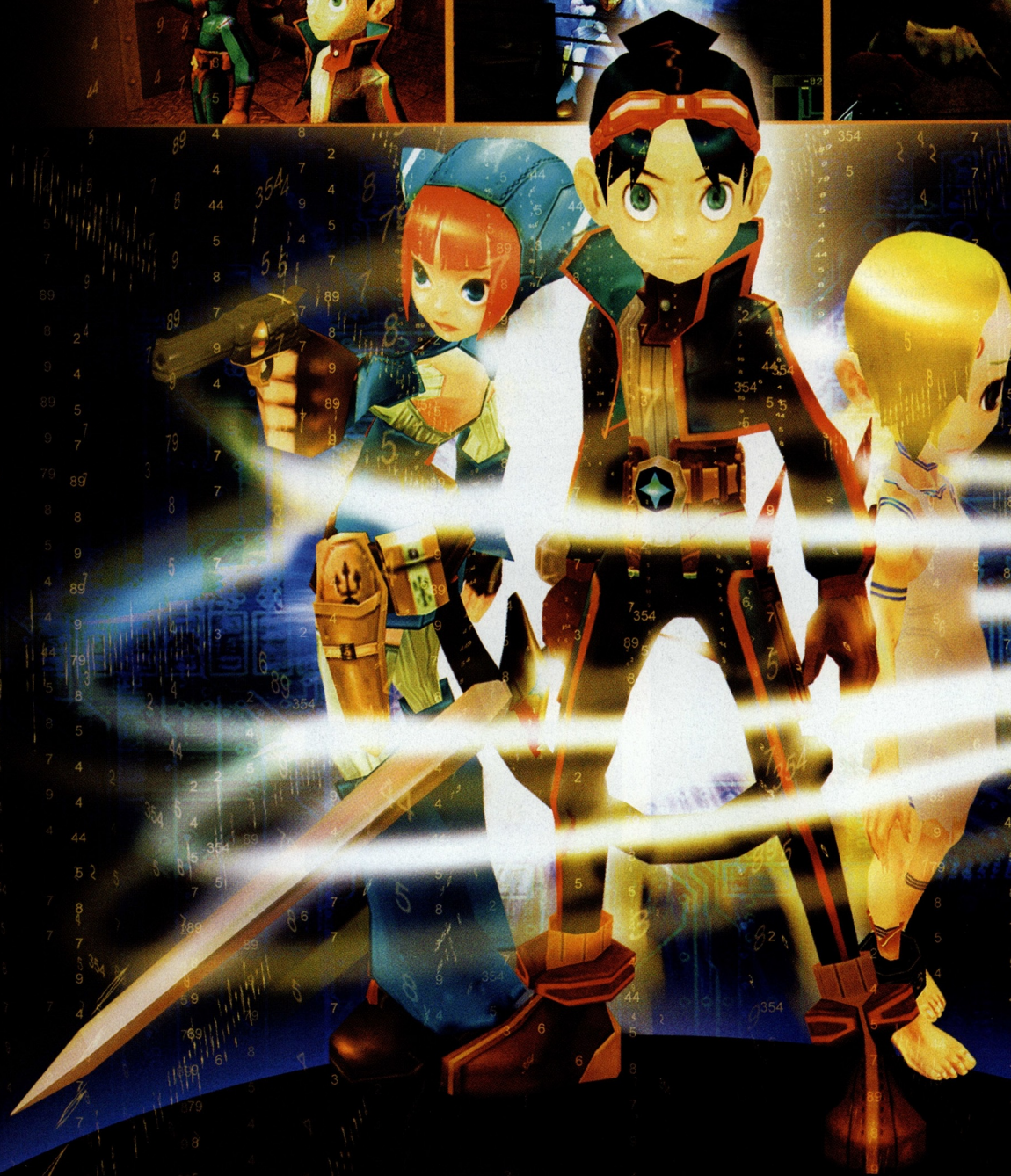


012 Billy Hatcher...

Sonic Team reveals its latest Gamecube effort in this last minute first look!

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064 Primal

"You'd be hard pressed to find flaw in this system-defying feat of polygon magic."



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"The way Vince comes through the controller as he dispenses Pit Frogs, Imps, Bomber Beetles, Mondo Moles and the rest of this sordid cast is certainly the game's coolest hook."

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It all depends on who you ask. We set 14 developers loose on this question and what they have to say may surprise you



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"Though I'd be foolish to say that FFII is on par with legends like FFVI, it shines with the same light..."

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"Watching this modern-day, hypnotic fairy tale as a child must inspire such pure delight. Watching it as an adult reminds us what it was like to be that child, alive to the possibilities of a soaring imagination."



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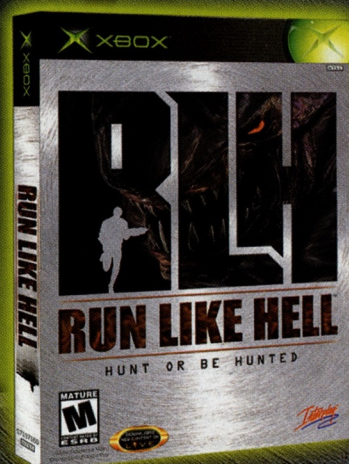
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playback

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write and win!

If we choose your correspondence as our "letter of the month", you'll receive a one year subscription to **play** magazine gratis. Give us your best thoughts.



Letter of the month

The red arrows can't be for the kids. If you've played any of the decent games aimed at the youngsters, they are made up of the same key exploration concepts that made classics what they are today. Take any of Humongous Entertainment's kids' games, like "Pajama Sam" or "Putt-Putt" and you find (semi) non-linear click-and-explore games accessible to the average 4-year-old. No arrows required. The puzzles are usually simple and require no more thought than "I need a rope to accomplish this task. I finish another task and I find a rope. Cool." The same kids graduate to Mario (name the platform) and the closest reference to "arrows" you see are trails of coins—sometimes. Other games use a story element (text/voice dialog) to direct us to the next point (Zelda). Using story elements or trails of coins is subtle and respects the genre. Having my next target set for me and having my autopilot engage the target (Freelancer demo) robs me of my God-given right to get lost trying to navigate to the target. Sure, if I was actually living in the 24th century and my real life depended on my navi computer, that might be a handy feature—so contextually I can almost forgive Freelancer...my joystick, on the other hand, will not.

What I need now is a blinking red arrow to walk me through the development

process that led to the addition of these features. I honestly fail to follow what starts out as "user accessibility" and ends up feeding the game to the user. Let's keep the arrows for the tutorial, and make the tutorial optional.

Glowing beacons on the horizon (Star Wars: Galaxies) and blinking arrows (Vexx, to name one) guiding me through my quests don't belong in the category of user-friendly enhancements and really detract from the experience. Who do the arrows market to? Not my 5-year-old.

Then again, I'm not a marketing guy, and I don't know what kind of demographics they considered when

want to say thanks for mentioning Putt-Putt. By the way, what's a "rope"?

Lives close to power lines

I say this, for it's true. Nintendo's idea of a 16-bit revival is a big bluff to the gamers of the 16-bit age and to the minds of the young ones that will hopefully take the place of the 16-bit crowd. From just playing around with these games I realize that the Big N has turned soft and games that are being recreated (from the 16-bit era) are just a bunch of cop-offs with extras from their not-too-far-in-the-future revivals. How do I cope

all of the magazines have their own identities so I'm not sure I follow you on that one either. However...people really like the multiple-score system we used for Vexx. We'll only do that when a game comes out simultaneously and they differ in quality. It has nothing to do with our preference—it's strictly a matter of technology. Vexx is underrated too—no doubt about it. The SP is marvelous, but it ain't Gamera.

My Devil May Cry 2

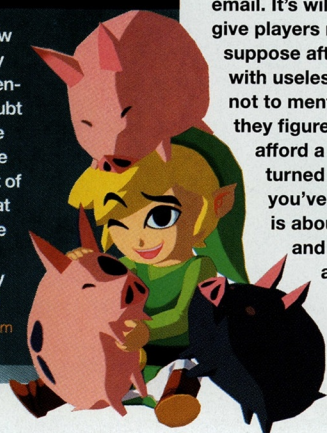
In your recent editorial you talked about the "dumbing down" of games for mass market appeal, but a few pages later praised Devil May Cry 2 as such a fantastic game. The reviews in every gaming mag, internet site, and talking with people who played it say the same thing: this game is so easy it's ridiculous. Every boss easily dispatched by jamming on the fire button and rolling once in awhile. Playing in Hard Mode was like normal mode in DVC 1. And the targeting system! It was almost impossible to hit who you wanted to. I just don't think you should have scored it as high as you did. I'm sure you'll get a lot of letters similar to mine. I'm glad you enjoyed it as much as you did, but for myself and many others, this game is mediocre at best. Let's hope Dino Crisis 3 and Chaos Legion are more on track for the serious gamer.

Loyal reader and subscriber,
Don DeMary

READER POLL

No question, the new Zelda will split many gamers. Nintendo enthusiasts will no doubt fall for the incredible gameplay and sense of wonder, but what of other gamers? What do you think? Is The Wind Waker god's gift or a load of baby crap? Let us know!

letters@playmagazine.com



There was a big red blinking arrow in my inbox pointing to your insightful email. It's wild that game designers give players more credit at 4 than 24...I suppose after having our heads filled with useless facts in high school, not to mention what girls do to us, they figure that by the time we can afford a hobby our brains have turned to mush. But seriously, you've hit the nail on the head. It is about respecting the art form and the player. We conducted a developer survey this month on this very subject and unearthed some astonishing revelations. Hey, I just

these features were planned. Maybe the target audience is getting dumber as it gets larger. Maybe some intellectually stimulating TV will make me feel better. Oh yeah, that's right...there isn't any of that around anymore either.

Anyway, take it easy.

Kris J.

with these monstrous rip-offs other than waiting for Nintendo to let other companies do the deed for them like what Rare or Retro Did? My answer is roms, roms, and rom devices with saving features. Oh yes, the intake of Vexx was very pleasing to the mind. I hope you people who create this magazine (that so many of your competitors mimic) will continue to use the triple rating system between systems. Other than that, the SP will be marvelous with its metallic shell and cool body that comes in Ying, Yang and Evil Blue. Ahh, the smell of new!

Winsome Houlder

Er...put down the pipe, man. Retro and Rare have developed most of the revival games you speak of and Treasure is doing Wario. Only Zelda and Mario have remained in the company of NCL and those games are spectacular. Plus, you said that games derived from the 16-bit era are copying their "revivals." Dude, they are the revivals. You need to talk to me about the ROM thing too, and those mimics. I think

game. I dole out 5s all the time these days—I'm becoming Ebert! Actually, I just really love modern game design. A lot of the times, especially in a game like this, I play for reasons other than difficulty. Modern game design has given rise to games that shine for completely different reasons. Take any RPG for instance. There's no such thing as a "hard" one, but they're wonderful experiences nevertheless. If I want to play for difficulty, I'll take Ikaruga or Panzer for a spin. DMC2 is a gothic masterpiece. I found myself walking through much of the game (rather than just jetting from place to place), soaking in every inch of it; that's great art direction and producing—and I loved having three diverse characters. I played in the hangar for like half an hour, balancing on the tail of the plain, doing mad air attacks...I just loved every inch of it. For what it's worth, everyone here disagrees with me too, so I'm the minority on this one. They wanted more taxing room-to-room and rock-hard boss battles too...but I love that this sequel was not simply more of the same. Hey, I beat Alien Soldier, okay? I've had my fill of chipping away at bosses for what seems like an eternity. DMC is one of the most beautiful games I've ever seen, but it was too segmented and centralized for me. As far as what other magazines give games—that's their business. I've read in other magazines editorials about how Miyamoto has lost it and Sunshine was crap, and seen hideously low scores for games like Jet Set Future and GunValkyrie. That doesn't make them wrong, just different, more mass market. I've been playing games solid every day for the better part of two decades and writing about them for 11 so I'm sincere in my convictions. Don't think I would ever sell you short. I appreciate your bagging on me. I don't want to get soft. Here I am complaining about how easy my platformers have become and I'm swimming upstream on DMC2. Maybe Capcom spiked my punch.

Japan play

I spotted a few stories on import Japanese games in all three issues of your magazine I have on hand. I've been importing games since the PS1 days, and I also collect rare import games for some of the older systems, from the bad-ass Neo Geo to the rarely heard-of PC-FX. My favorite site for import game news is Magic Box. My question is, do you have any plan to increase the coverage on import gaming? If not, where do you get your fix of import gaming news? Any other site worthy besides Magic Box? And yeah, any news you have on Treasure would be greatly appreciated (I read that reader letter in the March issue...!) Retro import games are definitely in dearth of proper love and respect. It would be interesting to have small features on really unique games that the American audience

was never blessed with, games like Radiant Silvergun and the never-ending Super Robot Taisen series. Sometimes I envy Japanese game developers because they seem to have so much freedom in game development, resulting in a diversity of games unequaled by any other country. Not all of those less-mainstream, more peculiar games were successful, but that never stopped them from making even wackier and weirder games. When I look at the US market, all I see are sports games and GTA3 clones; publishers don't seem to want to do anything else. Sorry, I digress. Personally, I care more about the games than the Japanese game culture. But as far as game culture goes, I think it would be nice to do stories like comparisons of the Japanese and the US game audiences, how their tastes differ, how diversified the groups are (in age, sex), etc. Or fun stuff like a trip down Akihabara or any other popular places Japanese visit to get their games.

Randy H.

We've been wrestling with this section since we started Play. Since most worthy Japan games get picked up these days in mid-development, the need for a comprehensive import review section has dwindled. Then taking into account the coverage Magic Box affords (there is no better online resource), it's hard to justify any budget for an import section. What we're thinking of is a mixture of two things you touched on: feature stories and developer interviews along with rare game and retro coverage. In fact, there's a chance our old friend Nick Rox will be doing the honors live from Japan. If he can pull his head out of FFXI (he's finished over 230 quests!) long enough to make the move, we'll be in business from Japan once again. If not, look for the retro stuff and then the "culture" coverage sometime later this year. We're interviewing Treasure right now, so that's on the way. Play will do the Japan thing—it's in our blood!

play: nice with others

It seems that developers don't seem to place very much importance on cooperative play in their games (at least enough to put it as a feature of the game, which makes searching for games that

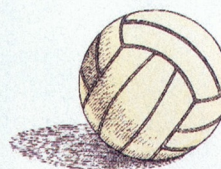
have co-op play that much harder). Co-op play seems reserved for first-person shooters. Maybe it's harder to implement in third person games, I really don't know. I think that co-op play helps bring new people, who would otherwise never really play any video games, into the fold. As an Xbox owner, my wife, for example, would not have played Halo if it were not for the cooperative play. Now she loves it. Sure, multiplayer can be fun, but it's not the same as sharing the experience of why game 'x' was so good, which is playing through the game. Now I hope to introduce her to the likes of Sudeki and Brute Force (hopefully in a few months; they're looking very good). Sadly Halo 2 was delayed 'til next year; there is much sadness. Hopefully Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War will have co-op also. If not, and it's good, I'll still get it.

In reference to the Panzer Dragoon interview in the January issue, I hope that Sega and Smilebit do make another Jet Set Radio Future or GunValkyrie, or Panzer (perhaps that should be "and"); I thoroughly enjoyed those games. The Xbox has so much potential, it's nice to see when developers can tap into

the power of the machine, not just for graphics. Thanks for you time, and keep up the good work.

Chris

First of all, Brute Force is your savior; the game allows up to three people to join in and come and go as they please, so while your campaign is going on, anyone can assist you at any time or all the way through. Halo 2 hasn't actually been "delayed," rather, the producers really want you to know that 2004 is simply when the game will be completed to the standard they feel necessary for it to measure up as a proper sequel. Their deal has always been "it's done when it's done." So, it's less a delay and more a testament to the franchise's potential, and of course, your satisfaction. Sudeki will also change your life. The game is simply gorgeous. Regarding Smilebit, we hear you, man, let's hope their spirit hasn't been broken by America's apprehension for real games...that would be a tragedy.



What do you see?

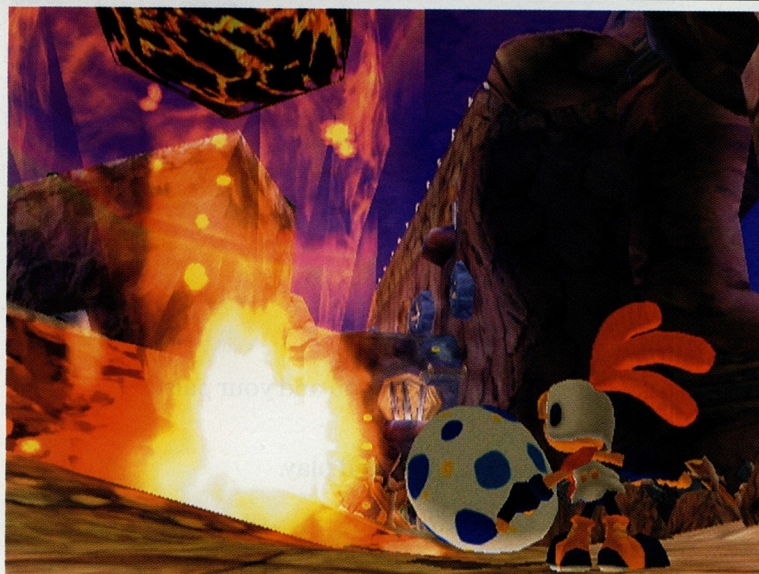
- (a) An afternoon of fun for you and your pals.
- (b) A reason to go outside and play.
- (c) Great potential for a terrible headache.

If you answered C, you might be ready to rule *My Street*.

Sonic Team's latest revealed!

We thought Yuji Naka may be working on the next NiGHTS or perhaps the latest Sonic, rather, Sonic Team are launching an all-new brand exclusively on Gamecube. It's called Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg, and it's Sonic Team's first new platformer since the days of the Sega Saturn! Expect innovative play mechanics to abound, as Billy uses the talents of various creatures hatched from eggs to solve puzzles and fight enemies within each fantastical level. All will be revealed at this year's E3, but for now, enjoy these fresh new screens.

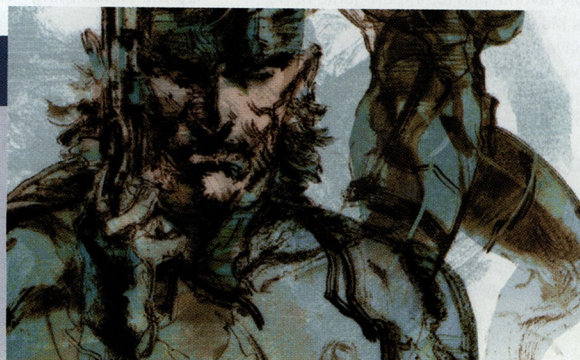
Yuji Naka has been behind some of gaming's finest moments – Sonic, NiGHTS, Phantasy Star Online, and now, Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg. What surprises will his latest hold?



Metal Gear 4: GameCube exclusive?

It started as a rumor from the lips of Shigeru Miyamoto, but since it's been confirmed by spokespeople and on Konami's website: Konami is bringing Metal Gear to the GameCube. Sadly, no details are out yet on what will be the first Metal Gear title on a Nintendo system since Ghost Babel came to the GBC a few years ago, but the current official title is simply Metal Gear Solid. At face value, this could

mean that the original MGS is getting a much-deserved facelift for the 'Cube, or it could simply be a working title for another refinement of MGS2: Substance, or...dare we think it...it could be an all-new Metal Gear game altogether. At any rate, we expect to know more by E3, and we're just glad to see some more quality third-party stuff coming for the GC.



Max Payne Fu

When you think of Max Payne, what immediately comes to mind? Excessive violence? Cool storytelling? Great action sequences? I'll never forget the first time I activated Bullet Time and watched Max jump backwards as he unloaded a Colt Commando into an enemy. It was badass. Finally, a game that captured the excitement of Hong Kong action flicks. To this day, no other game has been able to match the cinematic intensity or artistic flair of Max Payne.

But for college student Kenneth Yeung, the original game of Max Payne just wasn't enough. He wanted more action. He wanted more control. Since late 2001, Yeung has been working on his own modification for Max Payne and now it's ready for everyone to experience. "I saw the potential for a gameplay experience that I had yet to see in any PC game," explains Yeung. "Frantic kung fu mayhem, mixed in with a bit of slo-mo acrobatics and bullet dodging, seemed like a possibility only a few mouse clicks away. Eighteen months and a hundred animation files later, I'm finally starting to realize that vision."

Called Max Payne: Kung Fu Edition, the mod allows you to play the whole game with martial arts moves. You can still use the various weapons in the game if you want, but to truly enjoy the mod for what it is, you have to play it hand-to-hand. You'll never forget the first time you execute a spinning hook kick and watching the blood fly. To put it simply, this mod freaking rocks! "I'm still surprised sometimes on how elegant the mod's kung fu system ended up," continues Yeung, "but I honestly can't say this was of my own master design. Although it would be nice to believe I had an underlying plan behind it all, in actual fact everything was just thrown together as I discovered ways to program them in. Coming up with the various kung fu flips, kicks and combos was actually quite a fun and evolving process. All of the moves in the game are based on real life wushu and traditional kung-fu techniques, mainly because it makes my life easier to remain within the realm of the familiar." —TH

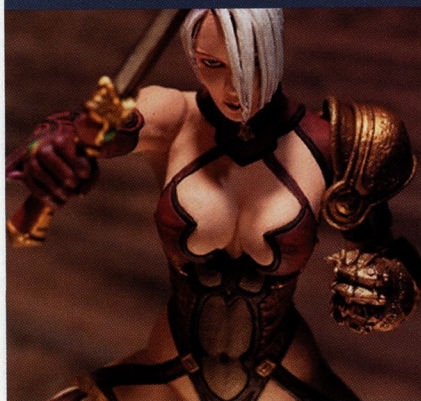


"Frantic kung fu mayhem, mixed in with a bit of slo-mo acrobatics and bullet dodging, seemed like a possibility only a few mouse clicks away. Eighteen months and a hundred animation files later, I'm finally starting to realize that vision."



Toy Buzz

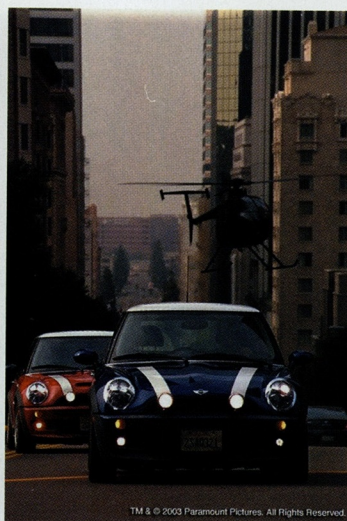
Video game related toys have been a hit and miss proposition of late. Coming to save us all from figures fit for melting, companies like Mirage Toys (Kingdom Hearts' Kairi shown) McFarlane (Soul Caliber 2 Ivy shown) InToyz, Toycom, Epoch, and Infinite Concepts, are producing quality video game figures that actually do the games justice. Look for our special report next month.



What is this?

- (a) A battery-operated monster truck.
- (b) Hell on wheels.
- (c) A toy for kids not old enough to drive.

If you answered B, you might be ready to rule *My Street*™



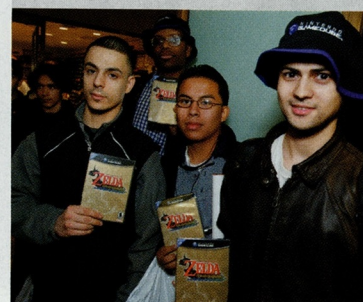
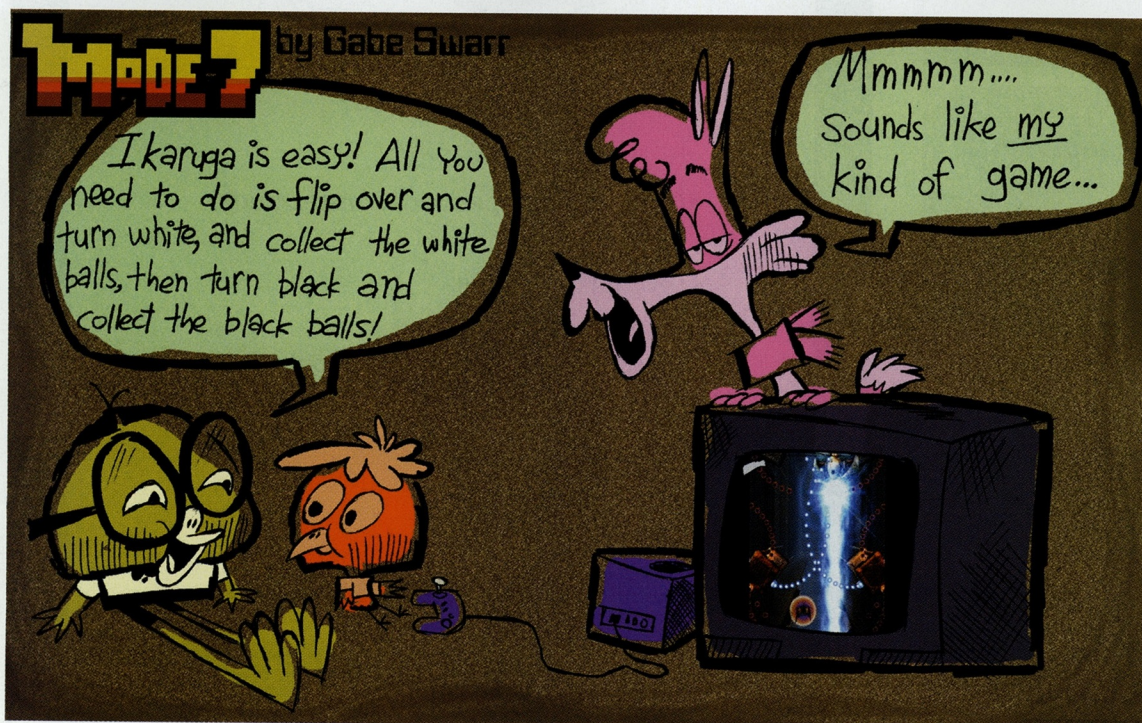
Eidos has signed a deal with Viacom to produce a video game built around the forthcoming Paramount Pictures feature film, *The Italian Job*, which is based on the 1969 Michael Cane original that spawned a PS game, also called *The Italian Job*. The good news? Both the film and the game were top notch and with Climax behind the latest version, it will likely follow suit. *The Italian Job* is about mastermind thief Charlie Croker (Mark Wahlberg), who pulls off an amazing gold bullion heist from a heavily guarded palazzo in Venice, Italy, only to be double-crossed by one of his crew, Steve (Edward Norton). Seeking revenge, Charlie recruits Stella (Charlize Theron), a beautiful nerves-of-steel safe cracker. Together with his former gang, Charlie and Stella follow the backstabber to California where they plan to re-steal the gold by manipulating traffic signals and creating havoc on the streets of Los Angeles. The contemporary remake of the 1969 classic is due for release this summer, and will feature state-of-the-art chase scenes on sidewalks and through subways in the new Mini Cooper and will be directed by F. Gary Gray (*The Negotiator*).



...March 24, in Rockefeller Plaza, legions of *Zelda* fans showed up in the pre-dawn darkness and waited in line for hours to be the first to sail home with the most highly anticipated game of the new year, *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. To show their appreciation, Nintendo and EB opened the doors of the Electronics Boutique Rockefeller Plaza store early so eager (and cold) fans could begin the next adventure in the epic *Zelda* series. In addition, six lucky fans walked away with *Zelda* memorabilia signed by Shigeru Miyamoto and the first 50 fans in line received special limited-edition Link bobble heads—which promptly went up on eBay (better not!).

...Funny how the day after Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* won an Oscar, Disney decided to re-release it in 800 theatres—more than it opened in. Commenting on the announcement, Dick Cook, chairman of Walt Disney Studios, said, "We're thrilled that the Academy has chosen to honor *Spirited Away* for its incredible achievement in storytelling and artistry and we're proud to be associated with legendary filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki in bringing his masterpiece to moviegoers across the country. With this important Oscar recognition, the film will have the additional awareness and appeal needed to find a welcome reception. All of us at Disney are extremely proud to have had three of this year's nominees in the Best Animated Feature category and to have played a part in bringing the award-winning *Spirited Away* to moviegoers." In other words, they thought *Lilo and Stitch* was so much a lock they were counting the DVD money. The next time Miyazaki blesses us with one of his masterpieces, Disney best pay it the same respect it does schlock like *Jungle Book 2*.

...In another bit of grand anime news, Production I.G. (*Jin-Roh*, *Ghost in the Shell* TV, *FLCL*, *Read or Die*) announced they have produced ten minutes of anime that will be used sporadically throughout Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (much like McFarlane's work in Jodie Foster's *The Dangerous Lives of Alter Boys*).

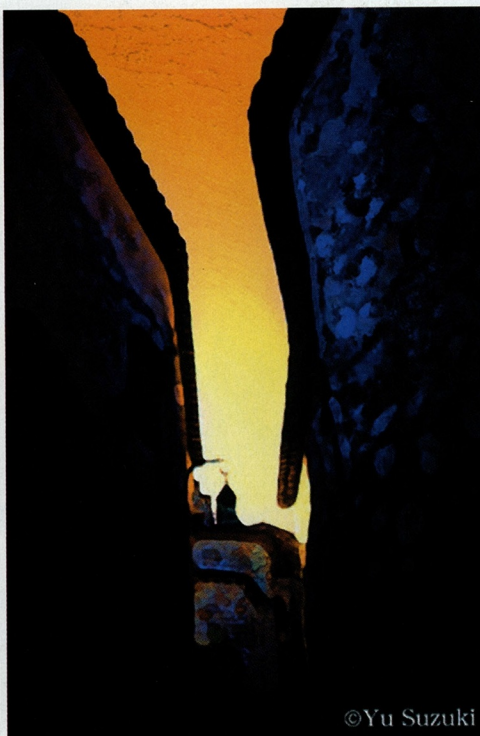


The art of Yu Suzuki

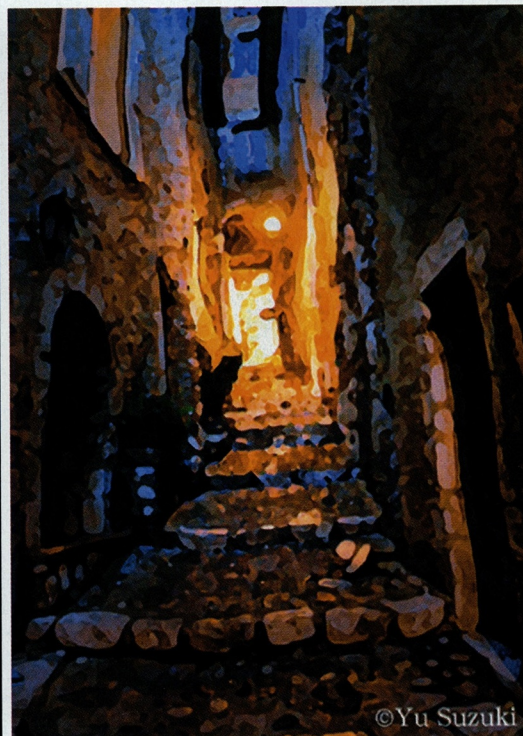


©Yu Suzuki

Yu Suzuki, the mastermind behind such Sega classics as Hang-On, Virtua Fighter and Outrun, has taken a break from the art of gamemaking to create his own personal gallery of paintings, now on sale in Japan. Most of the works are based on the small southern French town of Ceret, located directly in the heart of French Catalonia. Such greats as Picasso, Miro, and Gaudi originated here and created most their art within its serene setting.



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PlayStation 2



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no arms. no legs. huge features.

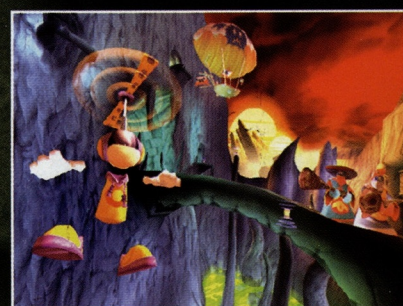


PlayStation 2



GAME BOY ADVANCE

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PLUNGE into 56 **ENORMOUS**
levels and **WHIP OUT**
all new powers & gear like
the Heavy Metal Fist and LockJaw
to battle the **GARGANTUAN**
Hoodlum Army led by **MASSIVE**
transforming bosses.



Official trailer
featuring "Madder"
by Groove Armada,
courtesy of Jive Records.

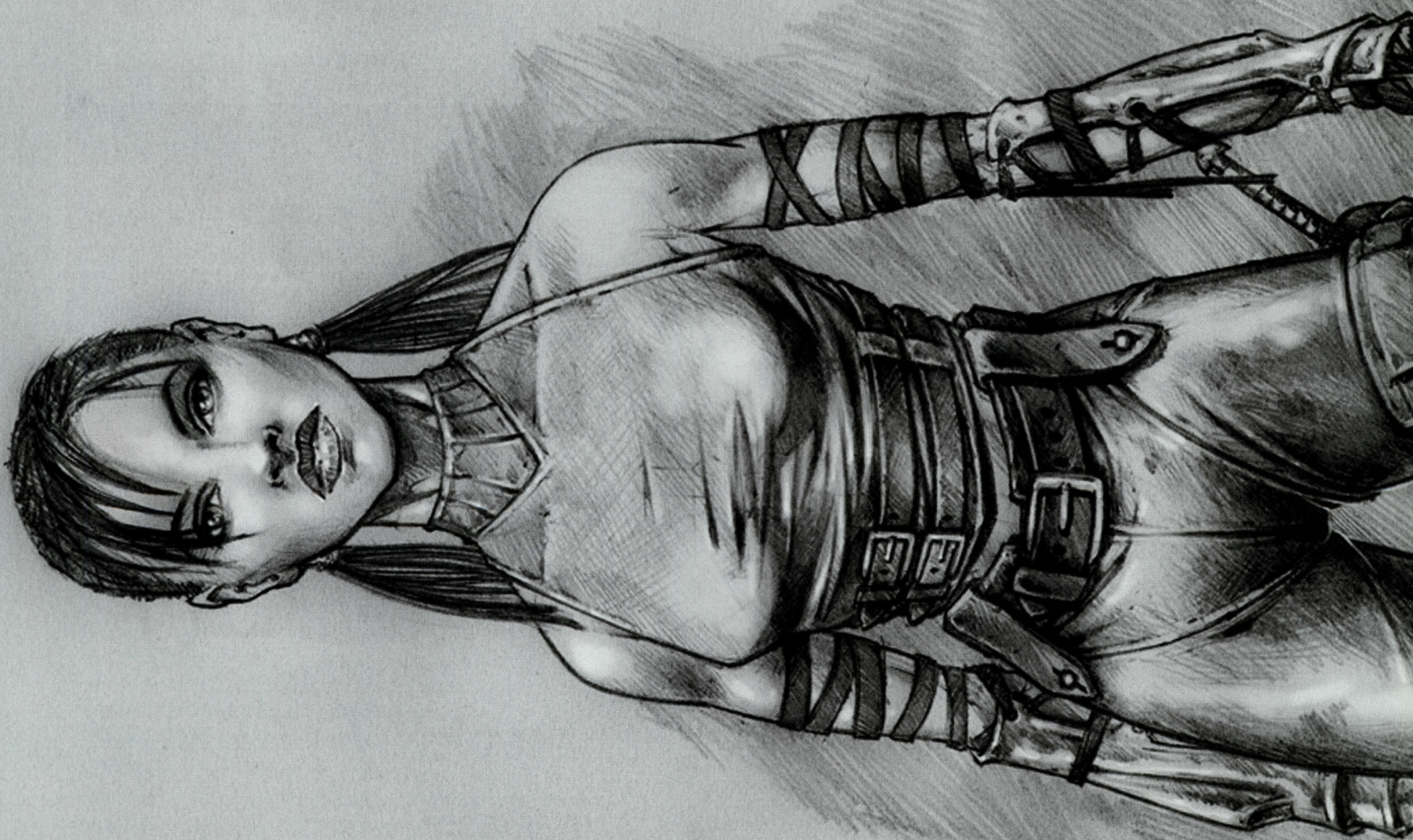


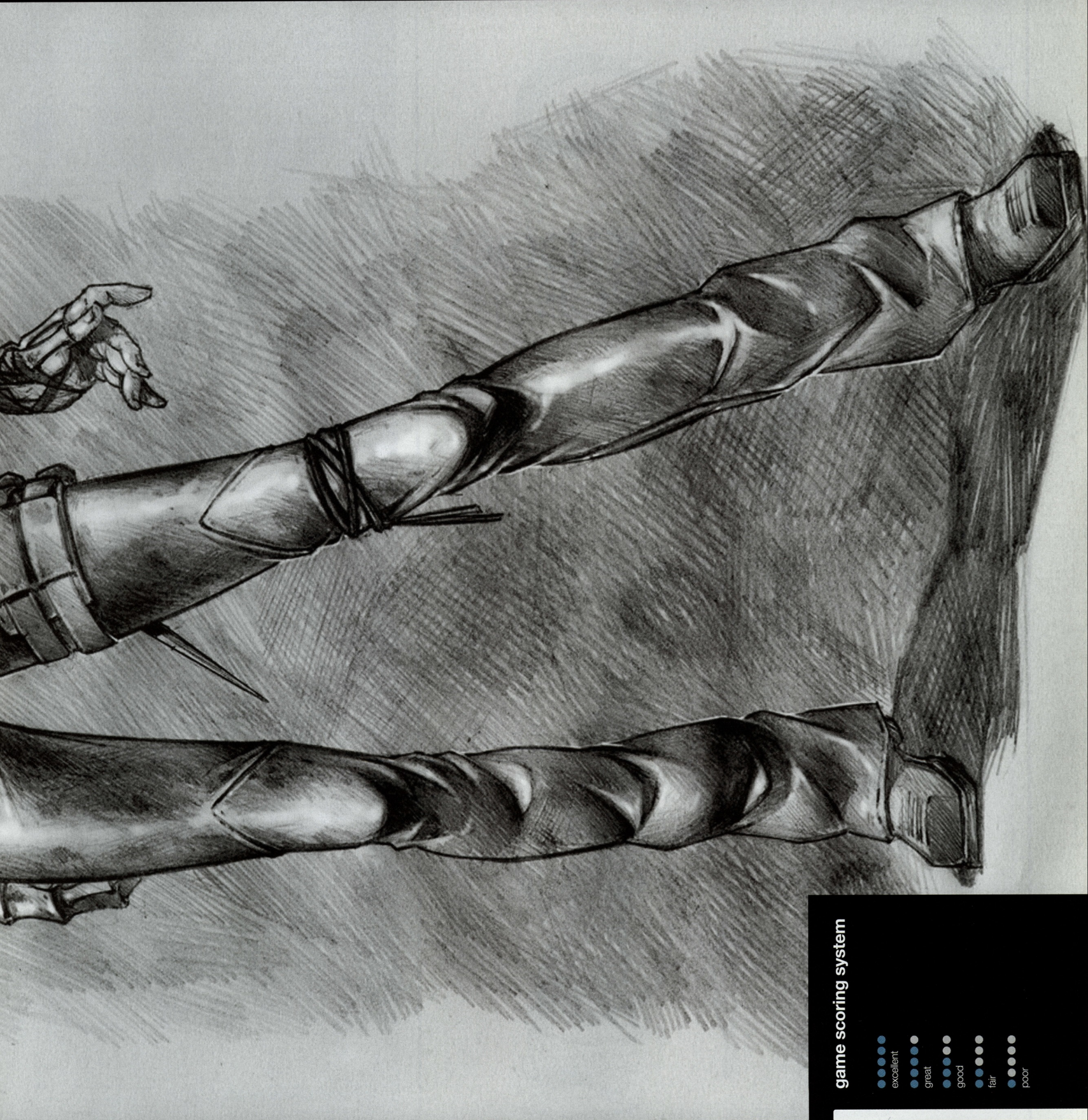
Violence
Comic Mischief



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game scoring system

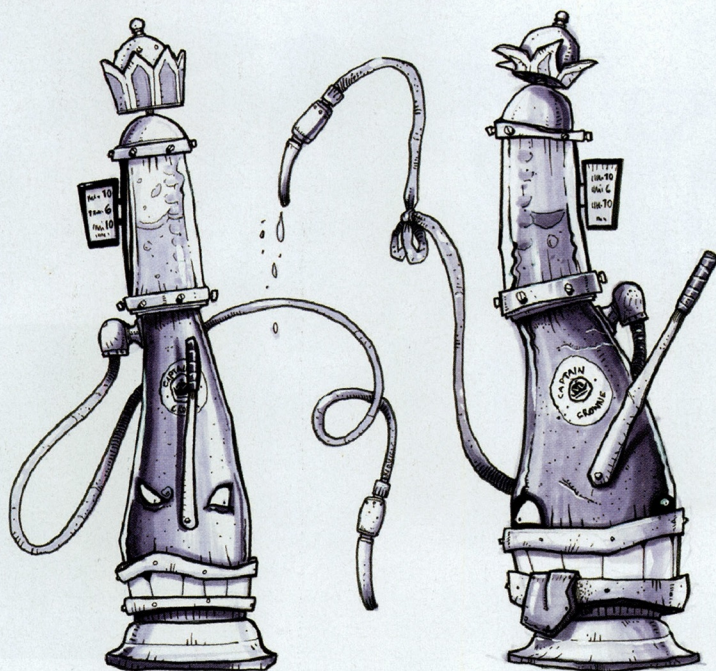
- ● ● ● ● excellent
- ● ● ● ● great
- ● ● ● ● good
- ● ● ● ● fair
- ● ● ● ● poor

V

OODOO INCE

Over the years we've played a lot of characters that do a lot of things, but none quite as cool as Voodoo Vince

words dave halverson



The voodoo doll...one of the last unexplored archetypes of the video game world. Why did it take so long for someone to concoct a game around such an obvious protagonist? Well, after hanging out with Beep Industries founder Clayton Kauzlaric, we think we have the answer: no team was crazy, funny and talented enough, all at the same time. Microsoft deserves credit, too. It takes an open-minded, idealistic and trusting publisher to green-light a game where the gist is self-inflicted pain. It's also the way nearly every great video-game character came to be.

My love for video games, and subsequent career writing about them, sprang from an undying, and some say unnatural, affinity for platformers; like Ebert loves the movies, I love platformers. Since *Ninja Gaiden* on the NES—the one that hooked me—my life has revolved around the anticipation of one after the other. But what really makes a good one? What's the make-or-break quotient—the difference between a Banjo and a Blinx? (I love Blinx, by the way, but where were the masses?) While I could write a novel on the subject (and probably will someday), I believe there are a few prerequisites without which they don't stand a chance, and Vince has them all:

1) Personality and feel. A good critter has to have personality to burn and animate like a gazelle. Not personality in the conventional sense of the word, but twisted, to be exaggerated and endearing at the same time. Think about some of the greats: Banjo is aloof, Conker—as funny as hell—Crash is a loon, Earthworm Jim is a shameless freak, Mario epitomizes happiness, Rayman is fantasy personified, Blinx is—I'm actually not sure what he is yet—Maximo is stalwart and proud, Ratchet and Clank—smart and sarcastic—Wario's a bastard, Sly Cooper is cunning and smooth, Jak and Daxter are nimble and inquisitive. All of these characters possess personality traits that come right through the controller. They don't have to say a word; you can feel it in every frame.

2) Creative universe and varied gameplay. Even the best character in an underwhelming environment is just wasted polygons, and trite gameplay can spell disaster for even the coolest critter. Jumping is key but clever puzzles and situations—along with stuff to ride whenever possible—are a must to obtain blockbuster status.

3) Finally, a strong supporting cast and compelling bosses remain one of the cornerstones of every great platformer. They're becoming increasingly harder to innovate on, but are often the difference between a good game and a great one.

Just taking those few elements into account, Voodoo Vince is surely on his way to becoming a big, bright, shining star. As soon as you roll your tongue back into your pie hole after getting a look at the game's gorgeous architecture (it's insane right from the start), you'll notice

voodoo vince

system: xbox
developer: beep industries
publisher: microsoft
available: fall

that the little freak you're controlling is truly something special. You want one. Even though he's got pins in his head and clubfeet, you want to hold him and squeeze him...and then he opens his mouth...now you want a talking one. It doesn't take long to sniff out the depth of the gameplay either, or realize that you're in for one of those legendary quests, the kind you stay up all night for the day before it hits retail. The levels—places like Crypt City, Brusque Manor, The Bayou, The Carnival, and Roachfort—are immense and harbor enough nooks and crannies for even the most anal-retentive gamer to raise a brow; window dressing for core missions that are steeped in timing stunts, clever puzzles and dexterity challenges. Voodoo Vince has the kind of levels that reek with possibility, beckoning the player to stick around long after the deed is done. And the characters, especially those integral to the plot, sweep you into their shady domain at first glance. Concept artist Doug Williams did an amazing job setting much of the tone for the game; the unmistakable, eerily dark yet whimsical feeling that pervades all things voodoo hangs in the air. With characters like Madame Carmaine, Crawdad Jimmy, Bones McMurty, Jeb and Fingers, you can imagine the possibilities.

What sets all of this apart, however, goes back to personality and feel. The way Vince comes through the controller as he dispenses Pit Frogs, Imps, Bomber Beetles, Mondo Moles and the rest of this sordid cast is certainly the game's coolest hook.

Whenever possible, although Vince has an array of moves, self-inflicted pain—something that unbelievably has never been done before—is the name of the game. Voodoo attacks like the Chainsaw, Pitchfork Follies, Piñata, Iron Maiden, or Blender (to name a few of, like, 40) do exactly what they're called. Dying in a video game just took on a whole new meaning. Of course, Vince feels no pain...his attackers, however, don't fair quite as well.

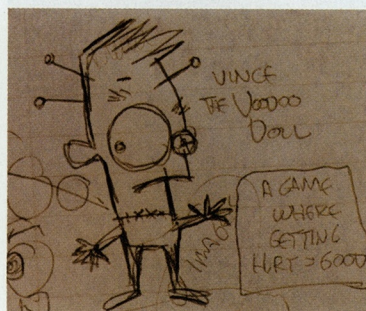
The opportunity to present Voodoo Vince as a world exclusive was a huge honor for us—especially since you just don't see print exclusives anymore—and an immeasurably significant way to begin a potential blockbuster's climb to the top. From here, Vince will be subject to the rigors of the net, jaded editors and paranoid retailers. We'll of course follow through until the last pin is inserted, and since this is the place for the platform-savvy, whatever you do, don't touch that dial (or at least program us into your remote).

"The way Vince comes through the controller as he dispenses Pit Frogs, Imps, Bomber Beetles, Mondo Moles and the rest of this sordid cast is certainly the game's coolest hook."



Voodoo Vince is the first game out of the newly formed Beep Industries

We sat down with Beep Industries founder Clayton Kauzlaric regarding all things Vince...



play: Vince is easily the most creative video-game character to come along since Dynamite Headdy (and for everyone who knows who that is, bravo to you). Tell us how he came to be.

Clayton Kauzlaric: Is that some sort of hidden pun? Mentioning a Genesis game in the Vince genesis question?

Cooking up Vince was pretty simple. It wasn't like some sort of stunning revelation on a mountaintop. I was sitting around the house doodling on a notepad. I've done that non-stop since I was a kid. In meetings...watching TV...while I'm on the phone...when I should be paying attention in school, etc. I usually end up combining the goofy stuff I draw with a game concept at some point. With Vince, I was just sitting in my den scrawling some random thoughts and pictures. I had recently decided to leave a perfectly good job to start my own company. I was thinking about an unpleasant chapter in my life and ended up making a rough sketch of a little voodoo doll with big, nasty pins jammed into his head. Next to that, I wrote "Vince The Voodoo Doll—A game where getting hurt = good." That's it, really. It seemed so simple and interesting that I had to see where it would go. I almost immediately started writing a concept doc.

What about Beep? You're small, you're new, you're obviously insanely talented...tell us about the company.

CK: I started Beep Industries back in 2000. Like I said, I didn't have a bad job—but after Humongous ended the Cavedog label, I was at loose ends. The folks in charge didn't want me to go away, but they didn't know what to do with me either. I had spent the previous ten years busting my ass on a bunch of titles, mostly as an artist. The previous three games I worked on involved crunch times lasting well over a year apiece. That was bad, but then I

spent a year doing next to nothing. That was worse. I think my sense of mortality crept in about then. I realized that I can't work like a maniac forever, and the number of games I get to make is very, very finite. That's partly what made me decide to start a company. If I was going to put my health and sanity on the line, I wanted it to be on my own terms.

Now that I have a little perspective, it's always interesting to see a new crowd come along every few years and react with surprise and alarm when they notice that the game business isn't particularly pleasant. People who make cars or grow alfalfa probably have the same complaints about their line of work. On some level every industry sucks. The best you can hope for is a little corner that doesn't suck. Even if you end up making games about potato chips, the company you keep can make all the difference.

Speaking of which, some great people chose to leave their comfy jobs and come along for the ride. Kurt Pfeifer, a programmer and one of the nicest guys in the biz, was the first. Kurt did a lot of in-game programming for puzzles and Vince himself. Next was Brian Brown. Brian is our systems architect. He talks to the hardware, but we don't hold it against him. I decided that programmers are better off programming than they are doing the payroll, so I lassoed in an old friend with a knack for numbers and business stuff, Harald Kohl. Harald was a tour manager for bands like Garbage, but after ten years, life on the road was getting to be a grind. Gary Hanna joined us after that. He assembled the most talented team of artists I've ever seen under one roof and inadvertently provided the basis for a lot of Vince's personality. Barb Hanna (yes, they're married) came on board as our executive producer. Barb tracks everything that's happening on the project from day to day, keeps everything going smoothly and acts as our main conduit for communication with Microsoft. Last, but not least, Matt Setzer was nice enough to spearhead our technology and manage the programmers. Matt is a scarily smart guy. Matt keeps a big red bat at his desk. This is reserved for artists, designers and programmers unlucky enough to break the game in some way. Avoiding the bat has been a great motivator for keeping the game on schedule.

With Beep, we really thought we would end up making games about potato chips. We were pitching Vince all over the indus-

try, but I was starting to think he would never find a home. The idea always got a stellar reception, but publishers never seemed to take the next step: paying us to make it. The industry was getting noticeably more risk-averse as the economy slowed down. Sometimes publishers would just vanish overnight. None of us were getting a paycheck, but the group stuck together anyway. I still can't believe it.

After we signed a letter of intent with Microsoft, we added a few more people and started building a prototype. Once the project got the full green light, we hand-picked some more amazing people. They were all on a short list of my favorite people from the last ten years in the industry. Most of the artists hailed from Gary's old crew at Cavedog. It's a small business. I've been at three or four jobs with some of these people. I totally trust every one of them. There isn't a "seat holder" in the bunch. It's like M*A*S*H, but without Frank Burns.

Beep Industries is pretty small for this type of project. We have just 22 people, who work in a big open space in Kirkland, Washington. We assembled a veteran crew

so we could work smart and fast. Many of us have been through projects together in the past, so there is an amazing level of telepathy around the office. Vince has been on schedule since day one, even though most of us go home after a normal day's work. It's all about not making rookie mistakes and keeping focus when the day begins. We're going to have a pretty major crunch in the next few months as the game nears completion, but that's when crunch should happen. Even old codgers like us can handle that.

All in all, we still can't believe we got the chance to make Vince. I honestly love getting up and going to work in the morning. Not a lot of people can say that. It totally doesn't suck, and I don't have to shudder every time I reach for a potato chip.

When setting out to build a character-driven, epic-scope adventure/platformer in today's market, where do you start? There are so many variables these days. Who would you say your game is more tailored to?

CK: I started by really liking some great character-platformers. I've always been a fan of the titles from Rare, Shiny and

"Look at me! I'm the coolest video-game character ever! Wait, do I have a... Oh shit!"





Whatever happens here, it can't be good. New Orleans + cemetery + night = bad

Naughty Dog. I would have bought a dozen more of their games every year if there were more of them. Their games really inspired me to make one myself.

Who is it tailored to? This is going to sound arrogant, but the answer is me. I think the greatest games are those created to please their makers. The best reason to make a game is because you want to play it. I like tricky platforming, so the game has a lot of that. I like quirky puzzles, so there are plenty of those. I like vehicles and mini games, so we piled on as many of those as we could. We hope that fans of the genre will like what we did. We want everyone to enjoy our game. But making Vince was a selfish act from day one.

With the voodoo theme (which is awesome, by the way, and you pull it off brilliantly), are you hoping to reel in a wider audience? Vince certainly can't be accused of being too cute or too dark.

CK: The game certainly isn't either of those things. We did keep it pretty light. I think the game's humor is one thing that keeps things from getting oppressive, even though Vince makes his way through a world that is usually trying to kill him. I wanted to avoid overtly occult stuff, so the whole voodoo thing is done with a very light and silly tone. It's Hollywood voodoo, basically. The trick was making the game strange, but not too dark. Twisted, but not

disturbed. There is an air of mystery to the world, but not outright horror. It's a fine line to walk, but I think we pulled it off.

Hurting yourself to hurt others is the coolest thing since throwing your head, but what else can Vince do? What other sorts of play mechanics are in here?

CK: The voodoo powers are a great hook. It's a good calling card for Vince. When anybody asks what's unique about our game, I don't have to wave my arms and make up something contrived. But we needed more than that to make a real adventure.

Vince can fight. He can duke it out with monsters, although his voodoo powers are the best way to go. He can do a punch, a combo punch, a spinning kick and a head butt. He can jump, double jump and hover. Later, we give him two other abilities, a Swing Pin move, which lets him do some serious Tarzan action, and the All Seeing Eye, which turns his big peeper into a scanner for missing items. Vince pilots a number of different vehicles over the course of the game. Some vehicles are related to boss battles, some are tied to puzzles. Others are just a way of getting around a level.

You have a lot of comedy in the game—what sort of tone are you going for?

CK: The tone is hard to describe, since hu-

mor can take so many forms. Vince himself was designed to look funny. There's a lot of slapstick with the more extreme voodoo powers, but there is also an underlying thread of sarcasm. Vince knows he's in a video game. He makes caustic little quips about the monsters, he wonders who the hell leaves sparkly stuff lying around the game environment. He doesn't seem to like the fact that he has to go out into the world and be the hero. I guess the answer to your question would be "sarcastic slapstick." Is that "sarcastic" or "slapcasm"?

Making Vince has been great therapy for all of us. Most of us worked for years on games that take themselves very seriously. There wasn't any room for humor, even though the people I worked with were some of the funniest people I'd ever met. We would laugh ourselves sick during meetings, but the jokes were never something we could put into our games. Vince comes a lot closer to that. That's a great feeling.

We noticed the music in the game was extremely well textured and authentic—can you elaborate?

CK: We owe it all to the Internet. You've seen how textured and atmospheric the game is. I really wanted music that could match that. Our setting is based on New Orleans, so that alone means there has to be great music. I wanted a big helping of

jazz mixed in with some pop and classical influences. Vince's world is pretty strange and bent, so finding someone who could also do strange, bent music was key.

When I made my list of potential composers I included some great, veteran people who have done lots of games over the years. Most of them were really interested since Vince represented a chance to do something unique. But I found myself thinking about a group I had heard years before called the Club Foot Orchestra. They did some great new scores for old silent films. They always managed to combine musical influences in a way that didn't seem forced. I did some quick searches in Google and turned up a guy named Steve Kirk.

Steve is on his own now, but he did a lot of work for Club Foot over the years, including some outstanding music for the short-lived *Felix The Cat* animated series in the early 1990s. I contacted him through his website and was thrilled to find that he does music for games. In fact, Steve did music years ago over at Atari. I couldn't believe my luck. Here was the best of both worlds: a guy with monstrous talent in all the musical styles I wanted and the ability to understand what works in a game.

Steve wrote well over three hours of music for Voodoo Vince. He hired some of the best session players in the Bay Area and created, I think, some of his best work ever. The game has 30-plus levels, and they all contain a unique piece of music. It's safe to say that no other game on earth has music like this.

Your environments—twisted versions of dimly lit New Orleans stomping grounds—are stunningly textured. What type of R&D did you do to obtain the look?

CK: Before we even had a deal, ten of us went down to New Orleans and took an insane number of reference shots. Okay, the artists took reference shots. I did some quality eating and drinking.

Our art director, Gary Hanna, had a digital wallet with him. Once a camera was full, the pictures were dumped onto it. I think it's the first time in my life I've seen people take as many pictures as they physically could on a one-week trip. Film was a thing of the past and storage wasn't an issue. We came back with about ten gigs of pictures.

You could say the game was really hand made. The textures in the cemetery level are from real cemeteries we visited in person. When Vince walks through our version of the French Quarter, he's walking on authentic, stained, nasty Bourbon Street textures. It was crazy. We'd pile out of a rental van at some roadside in the bayou. Everybody would pull out their cameras and take pictures of the scum on a mud puddle or some interesting tree bark. We almost never took regular touristy pictures. It looked more like an away team on Star Trek scanning for life forms.

One of our environment artists, Dan Cole, had a great idea. He moved his camcorder through some places while holding

"I'm completely anal when I play this type of game. I have to find all the stuff."

it ten inches off the ground. That gave us a sense of how these places would look for somebody Vince's size. We knew somebody as short as Vince would see a lot of the ground, so in some ways that's where you'll find some of the best textures in the game.

Are you using any bump mapping in the game?

CK: Sure. We did a lot of bump mapping throughout the game. Both the characters and the environment use a fair amount of it. Our system architect, Brian Brown, has the engine doing just about everything the Xbox hardware can do.

Overall would you say Vince is equal parts puzzler (and by puzzle we mean chain-of-events-type stuff) and platformer, or a little more one than the other?

CK: I think platforming has the edge, but we built a fair number of puzzles into the game. Most levels have at least one thing to figure out or goof around with.

Have you tuned the levels in such a way that voodoo powers are placed strategically for each situation or have you buried them to some extent to promote exploration?

CK: It's some of both. Every now and then a power is a reward for killing a mini-boss or solving a puzzle. Some are tucked away so Vince has to do some exploring to find them.

Once Vince finds a voodoo power, how long can he hold it? Once he uses it, does it re-spawn?

CK: The powers are permanent. Any power he finds he keeps indefinitely. But powers run on a fuel of sort. Vince needs to harvest beads by beating up monsters. Beads charge up Vince so he can use a power, which he can do whenever he likes.

What have you got in here to reward players who like to clean out every inch of a game?

CK: I'm completely anal when I play this



type of game. I have to find all the stuff. If there is a "good ending" in an RPG I have to see it. If there is a bonus for finding the last stupid magic peanut thingy, I'm there.

So there had to be sparkly collectible goodies in Voodoo Vince. With Vince, you can collect a number of different things. There are extra lives. There are items that expand his overall health. There are items that expand his capacity for storing voodoo powers. There are the voodoo powers themselves. There are some special moves you acquire later in the game.

How about difficulty? Have you injected ample extra lives for those special do-over sections? Your bosses rule!

CK: Thanks. Glad you like them. I think the game has some great challenges built in, but most people can get through them. Some will just need a few more tries than others. The fact is, I'm a devoted gamer, but I have the reflexes of a drunken pony. I'm not very skilled, but I'm persistent. I wanted to make sure the penalty for losing a life was fair. When Vince dies, he re-materializes somewhere nearby. His progress with puzzles and monsters is retained. Anything he dropped is right where he left it. Losing all of Vince's lives does send him back to the voodoo shop, but it only takes

a moment to jump back in and restart the current level.

Extra lives are easy to come by. Quite a few are hidden in the levels. The game also has a non-linear transportation system, the Ghost Trolley, which Vince can use to visit any place he's already been. A player can always find the nearest trolley and revisit those places to pick up more lives or health. Lives respawn every time Vince returns to a level, so players can rack up a huge stockpile if they really want to invest the time.

What about the camera? Everyone likes to gripe about camera. What we saw looked fantastic. Is it power-assist, or will you leave that to the player?

CK: The camera is one of the toughest issues with this type of game. Philosophies about camera schemes really differ. Lots of people feel that manipulating the camera is valid part of gaming, other people just want to play and forget about it. Both camps have to be acknowledged or you'll never hear the end of it. I watch people playing Vince in playtests at Microsoft every few months. It's stunning how few people touch the camera controls. Most of the players I watched never nudged the camera once.

Our situation was particularly tough. Levels start out with a pretty straight, clean appearance when the level designers are fleshing out 3D versions of the original paper layouts. Then something we call Gary-fication occurs. That's when Gary's level artists add a lot of twisty, bendy detail and decorations. Cameras hate that. Vince travels in and out of small sewer pipes. He's short, so monsters can really crowd him sometimes. There are endless nooks and crannies in our world where a camera can potentially freak out.

Fortunately, one of our programmers, Bill Kristiansen, did some spectacular work here. We've been aiming for a balance between automation and user control. So far we've had practically no complaints about the camera. I don't expect to please everybody, but I can say our camera is pretty damn good.

Many modern games prod you through puzzles, drawing your attention to what to do next. Are you leaving more to the imagination and design of the game? (Say yes or we use the pin!)

CK: No pin! Please! We don't present puzzles on a silver platter, but some information is needed. This is a really hard thing to balance. If you just leave a puzzle



to trial and error, the player doesn't get a sense that they figured it out. If you give too many clues, you're dumbing it down too much. With Voodoo Vince, I tried to put the emphasis more on what than how. I think a gamer doesn't mind having a mission. They don't mind knowing what's expected of them. They just don't want to be told everything about how to do it. We try to call attention to some key things, or give a sense of the overall objective without destroying the sense of exploration.

You're going for a good meaty 20 hours or so of gameplay?

CK: That's the plan. I think a freakishly good gamer might clock in around twelve, but most people should get a good twenty or so from the experience.

What can you tell us about the enemies in the game? New Orleans seems to have been overrun by vermin...can you give us a little background on the game's story?

CK: The story begins with some goons breaking into a little voodoo shop in New Orleans run by a lady named Madam Charmaine. The bad guys steal a compound called zombie dust and abduct Madam Charmaine in the process. These guys were pretty sloppy and this immensely powerful magical substance was spilled everywhere. Vince begins as a lifeless doll on top of a desk, but the loose zombie dust brings him to life. The problem is, it also brings all kinds of really nasty things to life. That's where the monsters come in.

Monsters come in a lot of shapes and sizes and fall into three categories. We have wandering monsters that just hang out in a level and try to give Vince a hard time. These range from dopey little demonic Pit Frogs to the belly bucking Bubbagators. There is an assortment of

mini-bosses. They are frequently tied to a puzzle or mini-game, like the drunken gas pumps in the French Quarter or the guard dog in front of Brusque Manor. Then there are big boss battles concluding each of the six key locales in the game.

Who created all of this wonderful lore? Were you sober?

CK: I'm guilty of writing the script. Story and character are two things I love developing. The original concept document for Voodoo Vince was essentially a storybook. It had fun, creepy illustrations and a deceptively simple tone inspired by the work of Edward Gorey. Vince had to come across clearly if anyone was going to understand what we were proposing to make. Getting that stuff figured out early made the rest of the game design much easier. Everything hinges on Vince and the setting.

But all that would have been so much hot air without a team to breathe life into it. They took the material to a completely different level. Every animation, every background and every piece of code just made it more and more real. Gary and his team made Vince live. Matt and his guys built an amazing engine. Our producer, Barb Hanna, made sure all this was perfectly synched up. Without them, I'd just be a slob who has silly ideas now and then.

I was sober most of the time. Sometimes I'd get stuck writing a scene, so I'd have story sessions where beverage played a part. These were with Gary and some of his art crew, usually Doug, Trevor and Brant.

Are you inspired by any producer/developer in particular? What are some of your all-time favorite games?

CK: If I had to pick a single influence, it would have to be Ron Gilbert. The humor and tone of Vince owes something to his classic adventure games. We ended up becoming pretty good friends during my time at Humongous and he has remained a great sounding board for my dumb-ass ideas ever since. Ron also has a great talent for letting ideas breathe and grow. When it comes to building a game it seems like he always knows right where to prune and right where to graft on new stuff. His commitment to storytelling is another thing you don't find every day.

I was hoping you wouldn't ask the "all-time favorite games" question. It's so damn hard to choose. Here are some things I really liked a lot: Rayman, Banjo-Kazooie, Tetris, Chrono Trigger, Earthworm Jim, Conker's Bad Fur Day, The Mark of Kri, Command & Conquer, Mario Kart (for SNES) and...oh...what the hell, Barbie Fashion Designer. It's a brilliant yet highly underrated game.

So, your first game and Microsoft is publishing. You have to be excited about that. How's it been working with MGS?

CK: It's been a groovy partnership so far. Microsoft has been incredibly supportive from the very beginning. When I was shopping Vince at other publishers, they

Don't worry, Vince feels no pain. Delivering this fire, however, will burn more than bridges



all seemed to love the concept. But most would either shy away because of the risk involved with introducing a new character, the price tag for developing the game or content issues. In one meeting, I had some guys from a big publisher finish praising Vince and the concept only to ask, "But does he have to be a voodoo doll?"

Microsoft never did that. Not once. They completely backed our vision for the game from day one and have been great to work with. Everyone from our program manager to the QA guys has always contributed in a helpful but not intrusive sort of way.

I want a Vince to hug and wave at people in traffic! Are there talks of merchandising? Will he hurt me?

CK: There has been some preliminary talk about merchandise. I saw a really early prototype at MS a while ago. I nearly tackled our marketing guy, Ben, to steal it, but he fended me off with a quick right hook. Toys would be great. Not everyone I know outside games really gets what I do,

but if you have a cool toy, you've officially arrived.

Barb made a custom stuffed toy based on my second drawing of Vince. That one will hurt you. She used some of Gary's old airbrush needles for pins. Those things are incredibly sharp. One actually drew blood in a meeting with Microsoft. Somewhere on earth, another tall, doughy guy said, "Ow!"

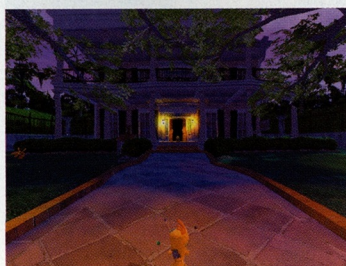
I made a couple Vince statues with some stuff called Super Sculpy™. If I make more, I'll send one your way. Just watch where you point it.

Well, with that we'll leave you to it. Thank you for creating a spectacular new game for Xbox gamers and for keeping it real in the process. Is now a good time to let folks know that anyone who doesn't pick up a copy of Voodoo Vince is fair game for a little bad mojo?

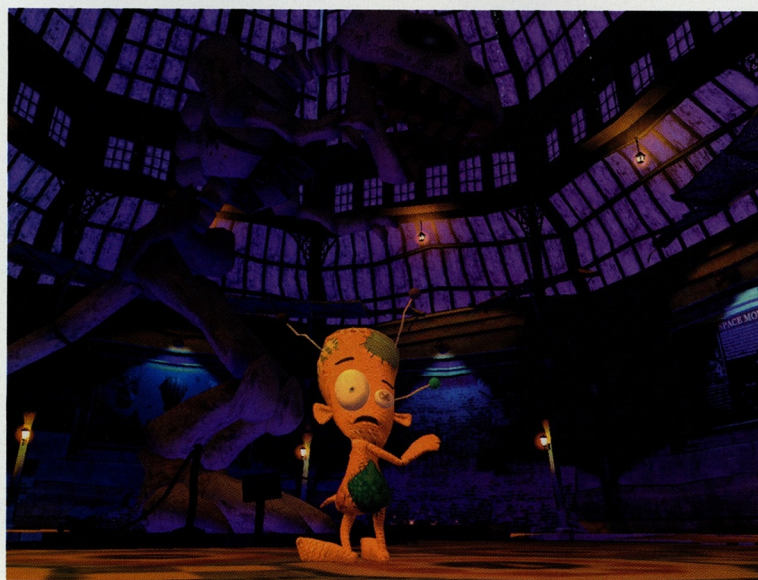
CK: Yes. And don't forget to buy an extra copy to keep under your pillow. Just in case.

OUT AND ABOUT

"Before we even had a deal, ten of us went down to New Orleans and took an insane number of reference shots. Okay, the artists took reference shots. I did some quality eating and drinking."



A sampling of the wonderful world of Voodoo Vince.
But wait until you play it. Vince does for voodoo what
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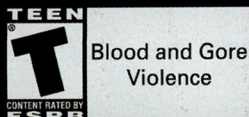
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A new look, a new tone, a pissed-off Jak

Jak II

words brady fiechter

Looks like one of the most technologically advanced and creatively exciting games coming off the late-2003 assembly line will be stamped with the golden Naughty Dog seal. The design house responsible for the globally popular Crash Bandicoot series is playing the sequel game to admirable effect with Jak II, addressing the smattering of criticisms leveled on Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy and building strongly upon its higher points for a much denser, much more rounded and adventurous game.

Daxter has been dropped from the title for good reason: this time the story is placed firmly on Jak, with Daxter along more for peripheral comic relief and occasional aide in the journey. Set two years after the conclusion of the first game, Jak II opens with an imprisoned Jak suffering

through dark eco experimentation in the hands of the villain, Baron. When Daxter manages to valiantly spring Jak free, we are introduced to a dazzling world far removed from the one the duo explored in their previous plight. The landscape has become a dusky metropolis, alive with countless inhabitants clogging the many arteries that wind through this massive hub that resembles something out of the *Star Wars* universe. Corruption and ruin have become commonplace.

Jak's motives are unwavering: he hungers for revenge, and Baron is his target. The dark powers that surge through his veins are reflected in his newly designed physical appearance; Naughty Dog stresses that this is not the friendly, effervescent scene we lived in the original adventure. The game is not dark in the sense that there

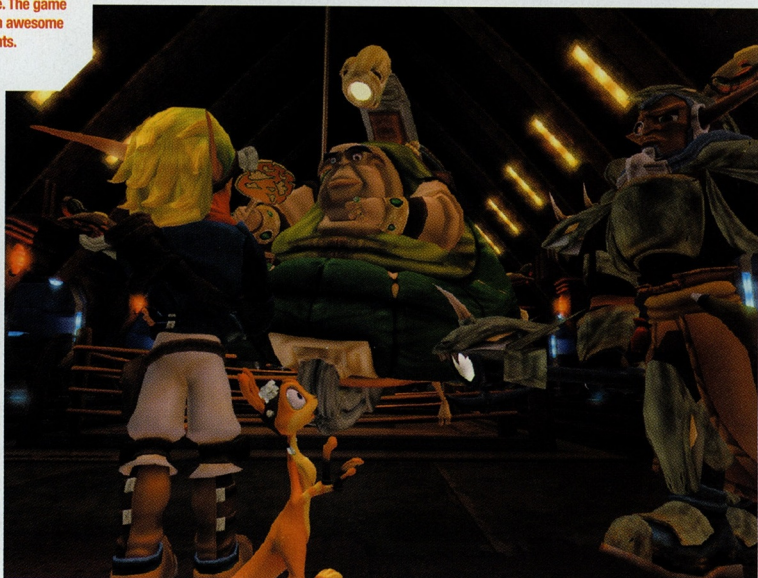
exists a pervasive depressive gloom, but there is an immediate sense of a more menacing, threatening tone in the settings and the creatures that terrorize the inhabitants. A massive police force patrols the streets, often giving chase for the kill. It's a blast to catch a ride on a number of vehicles and zip away from the pursuit.

All the standard moves from Precursor Legacy are here—spins, punches, thrusts, jumps—with a ton of new techniques available for the mastering. The most dramatic new attack is the channeling of the dark eco, which transforms Jak into a rageful beast who can cast arcs of deadly energy beams that fry surrounding foes with the force of a sudden lightning strike.

On his search for Baron, Jak converses with anyone who is willing to lend a helping hand. He'll be sent on



Jak has a new face and inhabits a spectacular, darker place. The game is filled with awesome sights.



"...Naughty Dog stresses that this is not the friendly, effervescent scene we lived in the original adventure."

missions throughout various channels in the city, searching for weapons, powerups, keys and items. An underground group known as the Metalheads, also working to destroy Baron, befriend Jak, becoming an integral part of the adventure. Naughty Dog makes forcefully clear that this is an experience packed with remarkably more depth and gameplay than the original, but extensive storytelling, with over 70 minutes of cinematic cuts, is being used to increase the dramatic pull. Events in the story springboard from Jak's actions, making Jak II, unlike Precursor Legacy, more of an interactive story with countless choices and repercussions.

When it comes down to the traditional path of actually playing the game, you'll be introduced to the engaging task of avoiding crumbling obstacles, leaping large crevices, avoiding the onslaught of heavily armed aggressors and many other durable platforming devices. Creative twists are being layered on the traditional ideas, and a lot more focus is being placed on enemy encounters. One basic gun becomes Jak's primary weapon, which is eventually transformed to morph into four instant-switching devices of destruction; one impressive upgrade in particular sends out a devastating sonic blast that's reminiscent of the police rifles out of the movie *Minority Report*. Naughty Dog is still retooling, reshuffling, adding and rearranging on a constant basis, as you would expect of such a massive sequel with such ambitious undertows. It only gets better from here.



Jak II

system: playstation 2 / developer: naughty dog / publisher: scea / available: fall

The warlords ride again

Onimusha 3

words brady fiechter



There's a new hero in town, and his
name is Jean Reno



No one can deny the gorgeous looks contained within Onimusha: Warlords and Onimusha 2: Samurai's Destiny, the first two in a three-part series of superb action games set in the rich land of ancient feudal Japan. For the still very early Onimusha 3, original producer Keiji Inafune has addressed what he feels was one of the game's major criticisms: rendered settings have been replaced with a fully polygonal construct, and the result is still nothing short of spectacular. With this announcement arises a question: what does this switch indicate, other than a visual shakeup? According to Inafune, in addition to the newfound freedom of sweeping camera movement, there will be much more active encounters within the world's setting, opening up a new dynamic for gameplay. The focus is being placed more heavily on melee action as well, with the slight role-playing dynamic of the first two games taking an even smaller role in the gameplay.

In an attempt to better the already stunning CG sequences that sparked the past



games in the series, Capcom is utilizing the skills of Hong Kong action star and director Donnie Yen to oversee the creation of all the in-game action sequences. Completing the talented team are Robot, the studio previously involved in crafting the cinematics, and Takashi Yamazaki, the CG movie director. The story underpinning Onimusha 3 is being penned by returning scripting house Flagship.

The game hinges on a dual-hero system, with a new character being introduced in 2004 France, where demons from original hero Akechi Samanosuke's time are seen attacking the city in an apocalyptic firestorm of destruction. From this present-day setting, the new hero, Jacques Blanc, modeled after the likeness of French actor Jean Reno, eventually finds himself thrown back to 1582 Japan. Finding the answers to why these two characters' realities have collided in such dramatically different times is the driving force of Onimusha 3.

The new 3D environments are as impactful as the first two prerendered Onimusha adventures

"No one can deny the gorgeous looks contained within Onimusha: Warlords and Onimusha 2: Samurai's Destiny..."

Onimusha 3

system: ps2 / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: spring 2004



Atari gets the girl

Kya Dark Lineage

words dave halverson

Über racing developer, Eden Studios—the masters of V Rally—have turned their sights to the adventure platforming ranks, giving us a shapely female to steer around when we're not tearing up virtual environments. Coming away from our brief demo, I have to admit it looks as though they are as skilled in the ways of action as they are racing—no small feat, especially given they're French (I'm totally joking). Searching for her brother, who's popped into a parallel universe, Kya runs across the Nativ tribe, a peace-loving people being oppressed by the Wolfen army lead by the evil Brazul, which I always thought was an Italian dish. Apparently, the only way to rescue her brother is to liberate the tribe, which entails mastering a slew of magical powers: freeing natives begets opening shops in Nativ city, which house the necessary tools to harness her new abilities; and so it goes, building to a cornucopia of fun through clever play mechanics... at least, that's the plan.

The gameplay shines in many respects, from high flying and falling, to disc surfing through lush fantastical settings, to a battle engine that affords the coolest multi-enemy offensives since The Mark of Kri. Beyond the implementation of the action, Eden have also thrown in their own monetary system, and a tinge of Dark Cloud-like world building: the more natives you free the larger their city becomes, creating a segue for each scenario, rather than just diving into level after level. Visually the game delivers big, with immense worlds in full view, a smooth framerate, and both light and dark worlds. Don't worry about depth or riding stuff either: Kya mounts everything but you, and there are enough timing stunts and new wrinkles in here to keep you up for days.



Kya's innovative battle system lets her kick fur all over the place—and the animation is superb



"The gameplay shines in many respects..."

Kya: Dark Lineage

system: ps2 / developer: eden studios / publisher: atari / available: q4

entertainment

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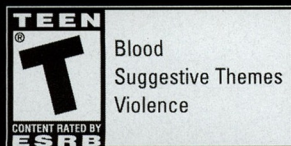
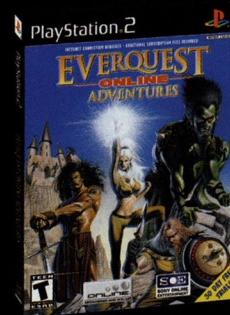
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Darkness falls, and the timid gamers begin to flee

The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse

words brady fiechter

There is a character in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* that wears a soiled Doctor Suess hat and carries a spear with a baby impaled on the striking end. His ribcage is exposed and his flesh hangs from his emaciated form as if it were on the verge of rotting off. His name is Famine, and he is joined by several other demons of the underworld, unleashed to comprise the four biblical figures of the Apocalypse: Pestilence, War, Famine and Death.

Standing alone against the forces of hell is the archangel Abaddon, who is frantically searching for the salvation of the world that lives inside three humans known as the Chosen. Balancing the imbued strengths of swordplay, projectile, magic and automatic weapon offensives, Abaddon searches to pull from the powers of the Chosen, combining attacks and skills for the necessary strength to defeat the onslaught of hell's minions. The journey begins in purgatory, where goodness and cheer wilt in the oppressive gloom. This is not a game intimidated by the extreme. Anything goes: limbs and chunks fly, heads explode, blood flows like a river of pure death. Bodies lie mutilated. A blast to the chest reveals an open, beating heart. Death becomes strength, gifting Abaddon's efforts with the nourishment of a tortured soul released from the fallen body.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse revels in its explicit gore and visions of doom,



but the meat of the game isn't cut solely from gruesome excess and ceaseless action. An extensive, very mature story is being carved into the gameplay, introducing characters designed by Stan Winston, Simon Bisley and Dave DeVries, with dialogue voiced by Tim Curry, Lance Henriksen and Traci Lords. While still holding many mysteries, the game is most certainly heading in an intriguing direction, taking the idea of adult gaming to unseen heights.

If a video game were nothing more than an art book, *The Four Horsemen* would be a rousing attention-grabber. Several months were spent on building the visual foundation before the first code was laid down, drawing on a tome of disturbing, sadomasochistic artwork to inspire the game's ultimate direction. I was fascinated browsing the many conceptual images created early on by the heavy hitters involved, building an even greater interest in what the final game will hold. Such highlights as the involvement of the Smashcut Action Team (*The Matrix 1-3*, *Fight Club*, *The Crow*) to choreograph and perform the action can only generate even more potential success for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. In the overheard words of 3DO while the game was recently revealed, this is indeed a bold project that is intended on defining a new path for the company.



"Anything goes: limbs and chunks fly, heads explode, blood flows like a river of pure death."





Death and despair live in every corner
of the game's universe



The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse

system: playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc / developer: 3do / publisher: 3do / available: fall



Incredible?

Hulk

words dave halverson

THE HULK Movie:©2003 Universal. THE HULK: TM &©2003 Marvel Characters, Inc. THE HULK interactive game © 2003 Universal Interactive, Inc.

MARVEL

Walking into Vivendi Universal for our first hands-on with Marvel's Hulk, I honestly didn't know what to expect. I knew what I wanted (a great 3D Hulk game) but whether or not Radical Entertainment, creators of Dark Angel and Dark Summit (both games I like but not quite the stuff of legend), would be able to deliver remained to be seen. Inherently, blockbuster movie games suffer a precarious fate: the budget is usually there, but often developers have to wait too long to create a coherent design document while the producers and licensors tinker with enough red tape to seal Anna Nicole's pie hole. Since these games are on super-tight schedules in the first place—timed to hit in synch with the film—developers are often left with no other choice but to shoehorn a new character set into an existing framework. Treyarch drove themselves crazy doing just that: Spider-Man was a Max Steele mod and Minority Report a Spider-Man mod—the same engine rolled out, painted a different color. As a result, a shop with AAA prowess ends up rolling out B material. Sure, they made bank, but are they happy? Are we?

Fortunately, the Hulk team was not subject to such strain. Rather, Radical beefed up to meet the demand (Hulk had a 60-man team and nearly a two-year lead time) and

received full cooperation from the film's producers. Like Shiny's Matrix, things got underway with a full design doc in hand, and it shows. One thing about this industry, more often than not, it learns from its mistakes. If companies hope to follow EA's lead and produce movie games on par with the best of the rest, film producers, studios and game designers need to get on the same page quickly to do a license justice. Either that or assemble massive teams led by gifted producers. A crap game, after all, can have a horrible effect on a franchise.

Other than being a huge opportunity for a shop that's long overdue, Hulk also happens to be my favorite Marvel character, which I should preface by saying I don't really care much for old-school American comic book heroes. I like Hulk, Batman, Spider-Man, X-Men, Lobo, Punisher and that's about it. I'm more Gen 13, Danger Girl, Battle Chasers, The Tenth, and assorted manga these days. Men in tights have seen their better days. Anyway, my point is I wasn't about to pull any punches for this preview; luckily, I didn't have to.

Hulk works as an extension of the film, meant to further the experience after you leave the theatre, charged, wanting to rip things from the ground and use them as bats. This

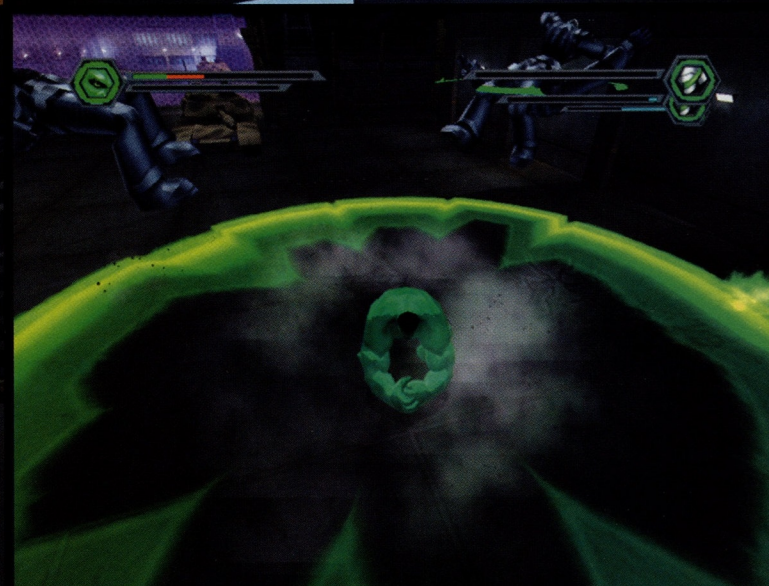
obviously makes describing the plot taboo, but I can say that knowing what the game is about makes me want to see the film that much more—and between the flick being heavily doused in CG and helmed by Ang Lee, my anticipation was already sky-high. Seeing how the Spider-Man movie game got caught with its web down, even though the film was great, Hulk is primed to lay the double smack down between the box-office and the game at retail, and Marvel know it; they're treating their big, green baby right.

When you think Hulk, you think immense power; a destructive force not of this world, coupled with a raw intensity, and to some extent just a shard of childlike innocence. When Banner gets green, he's out of body; the Hulk is purely a reactionary beast. Shoot him and he comes back harder, out of both rage and fear, but he also knows when to bolt, and that raw indecision comes across in the Hulk portion of the game, through the player. The front end of the game dumps you directly into a training-like situation outside a remote diner/gas station, where, as you deal with the onslaught of military might, you begin to notice the nuances in the Hulk's arsenal. Hulk doesn't just beat stuff, he's able to dish out pain in an array of ways. He can punch

Hulk's Sonic Clap: a mega dose of mean green



You can PICK UP many objects in the environment





missiles back at their target, literally use anything in the environment as a weapon in three ways or more, dispense the Sonic Clap (a crowd favorite), jump-hover and pounce (my favorite move), and when enraged, Gamma Stomp—producing a radial shockwave that acts like a little green nuke. This is what the Hulk is supposed to play like, and it does, from minute one. Later in the game, within closed environments, the same applies in a more standard linear form, but if you're being hammered, you can always keep moving, breaking through walls or steel doors to rethink your strategy. The gameplay is not of the clear-this-room-and-move-to-the-next ilk, but rather, one big event capped off by escaping—very Hulk. In terms of moves and play mechanics, they pretty much nailed it.

Nevertheless, if the environments didn't react and change due to Hulk's power and immensity, any true feeling of impact would be lost. To deal with this, Radical has applied a layer of virtual depth to every inch of the game, both on the vertical and horizontal planes. When Hulk ground-pounds or jabs a wall, he leaves a mark—not some cheap-looking dent, but a convincing chipping, cracking, or impact crater exposing baked-in layers on the textures. Glass, too, is convincingly portrayed; when Hulk breaks through it, don't expect a few shards, but a realistic shattering effect. This really drives the interaction between Hulk and the player home, adding immeasurably to the game's impact.

Other nuances lie in the AI and the lay of the land in terms of attackers, their type, and their defensive capabilities versus how many of them there are and what you have in the environment to help even the score. There are many variables to the action, making mastering each level an open book for the player to explore in his or her own way. I can see replaying this game many times to reap all of its rewards. It

just has a good solid arcade feel, only much more sophisticated.

Not having played the game from top to bottom in its final form, I'll leave the rest of the actual balance, boss fighting and AI to the review.

Moving on to Bruce Banner's role in the game—which wisely only encompasses about 20 percent—Hulk takes on a completely different feel, incorporating mild stealth and puzzle elements. Banner's not nearly as exciting as the Hulk (how exciting can a guy in a white shirt be?), but he works well to further the plot and provide a break from tossing limp bodies and foul beasts like rag dolls. Bruce's levels involve typical line-of-sight stealth—avoiding detection by any guards or spotlights—sneaking into top-secret installations to gather intel about his plight. The designers don't go over the top here and try to be Metal Gear, but they do inject enough intrigue to keep it interesting, going as far as making the player hack into computers by solving wickedly timed number puzzles. Personally, I'd rather just move on, but that's probably because my brain is mush from playing too many video games.

On the technology front, Hulk's prowess lies in obvious places. The Hulk model is beautiful and the ancillary characters, with as many as ten on screen simultaneously, look very good, especially mutants. The game overall is awash with an interesting veneer, melding textures with a cel-shading technique that's bathed in comic book-style shadows. It's not overly flashy or rich looking, but rather balanced for optimum model and environment integrity while maintaining a smooth frame rate amidst the engine's destructible nature—a balancing act handled skillfully by a team that obviously cares deeply about this game.

So this May 27, see the movie, pick up the game, and Marvel at the kind of feeding frenzy that can only be generated by such a titanic property as Hulk. Maybe they'll even tie in a nice music video...without Chad Kroeger in it.

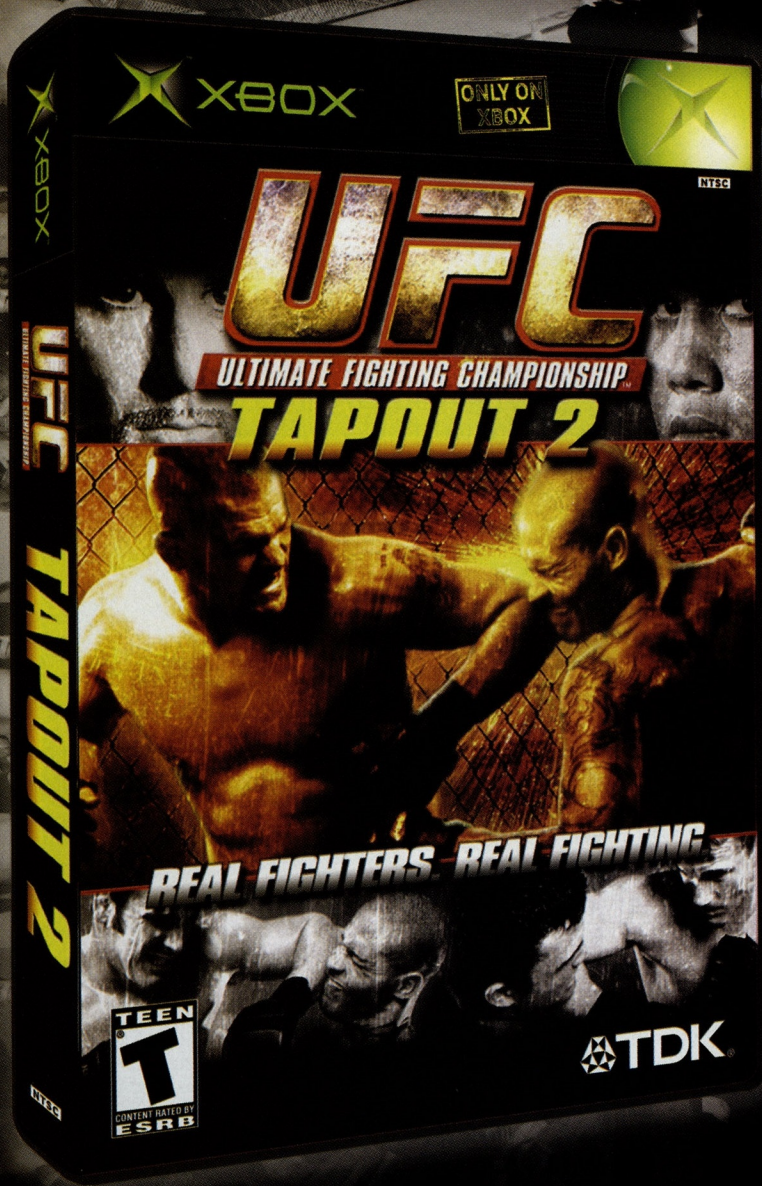
“Hulk works as an extension of the film, meant to further the experience after you leave the theatre, charged, wanting to rip things from the ground and use them as bats.”

Effects such as shattering glass are paid the utmost attention in the interest of staying true to Hulk's brutality

Hulk

system: ps2, xbox, gamecube, pc / developer: radical entertainment / publisher: universal interactive, inc. / available: may

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Dropping you into the horrors of war

Medal Of Honor Rising Sun

words tom ham

If you look at all the current first-person shooters in the industry, can you name the one game that always delivered the most compelling and realistic experience? Return to Castle Wolfenstein? Whatever. Since when did mutant zombies learn to fire weapons? Soldier of Fortune? Yeah right. Like it's possible to blow someone's head off with a handgun. If you had said Medal of Honor, then you're right on the mark. From the first Medal of Honor games on the PlayStation to the existing titles on PC and next-generation consoles, MOH has raised my expectations for FPS games considerably. Sure it's nice to forgo realism and fight battles in the distant future or on another world, but you have to admit, nothing beats you taking an active role in history and Electronic Arts is once again showing us the way.

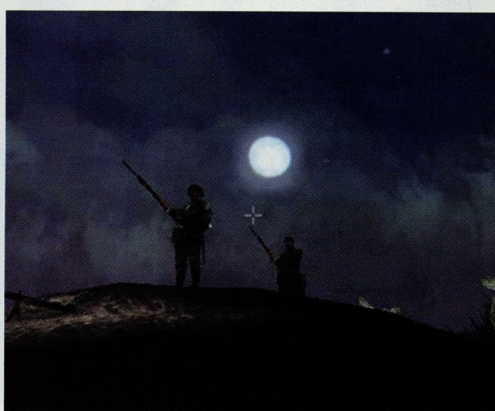
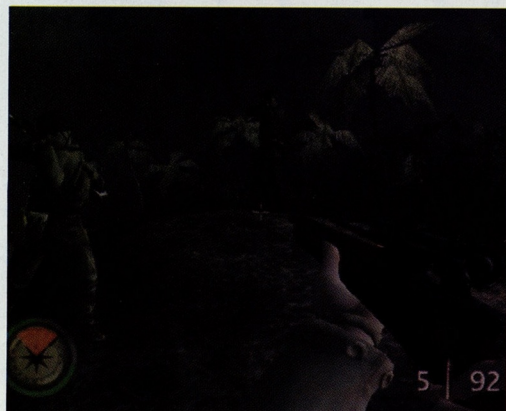
At a recent press event held at the historic Presidio in San Francisco, Electronic Arts showed the gaming media the next installment in the Medal of Honor universe. Medal of Honor: Rising Sun will take players

into the depths of the Allied campaign as they go against Japan throughout the Pacific corridor. "I am extremely excited to introduce this next chapter in the Medal of Honor franchise," said Rick Giolito, vice president and executive producer at Electronic Arts Los Angeles. "We have been waiting a long time to do a game set in the Pacific, and after the success of our Medal of Honor titles, it is now possible."

Remember how awesome the first mission was in Frontline? Storming Omaha Beach with your fellow soldiers—the level of intensity was unparalleled. So how do you think Rising Sun is going to top that? Pearl Harbor, my friend. Senior producer Tarnie Williams showed us a brief clip of what players could expect from the opening scene of Rising Sun. "We always knew we had to top Omaha Beach in terms of excitement and intensity," explained Williams. "Players will be forced to jump behind turrets and try to shoot down Japanese fighters and bombers. After surviving Pearl Harbor, that's when the adventure begins."

In Medal of Honor: Rising Sun, players will take on the role of Marine Corporal Joseph Griffin. After surviving the attack on Pearl Harbor, players will then lead an attack on Guadalcanal. Soon after, you will have to fight your way through the jungles of Burma and then the Philippines. In addition, Griffin will see combat at the Bridge on the River Kwai and then finally rescue his brother from a Japanese POW camp. Going after the Japanese war machine is a grand undertaking, and from the looks of things, EA LA is definitely right on track.

As of right now, there will be 10 missions in the single-player game. Unlike previous Medal of Honor games where the action followed a fairly linear path, Rising Sun will give the player a chance to change the story as they play. For example, during the course of the game you come across an innocent victim that is being tortured by the Japanese. You could either (a) ignore the victim and move on with your mission or (b) you could kill the soldiers torturing him. Making these types of decisions not only change the enemy AI, but



"From the first Medal of Honor games on the PlayStation to the existing titles on PC and next-generation consoles, MOH has raised my expectations for FPS games considerably."

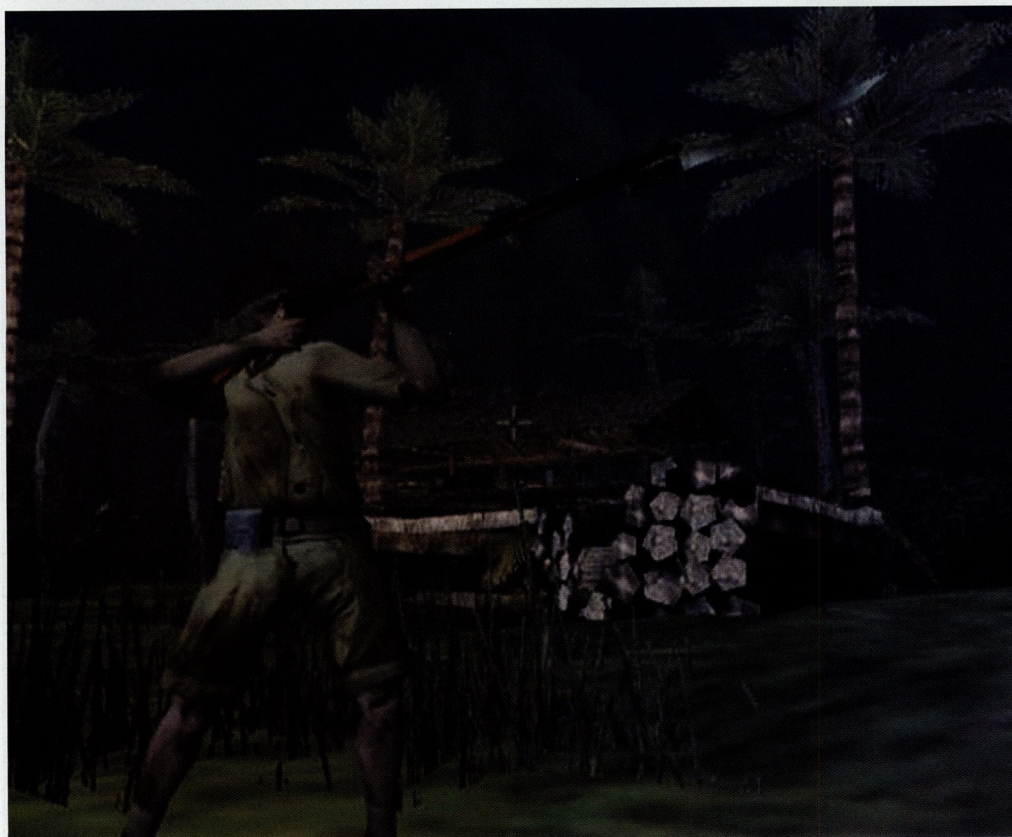
will also change the environment and completely change a mission path. So remember that person you just saved? He will now reveal a shortcut to you that avoids enemy contact all together. Players can expect this sort of thing all throughout Rising Sun. Missions will run the gamut from your basic run-and-gun to rail shooting to stealth-based attacks to hostage rescue. "The Japanese in Rising Sun are a lot more aggressive than the enemies you faced in previous Medal of Honor games," explained Williams. "Sure there are snipers and gunners, but there are also units in the game that will sacrifice themselves in order to defeat you."

Another cool thing to mention about Rising Sun is the multiplayer aspect of the game. "We decided not to have online multiplayer with Rising Sun," explained Giolito. "We wanted to concentrate our efforts to create another top-notch single-player experience." But don't fret; the developers have thrown us a bone. In Rising Sun, players will be able to team up with a friend and play cooperatively through all of the missions.

Without question, EA LA has a lot to live up to. The Medal of Honor games have garnered critical acclaim around the world and taking the franchise to the Pacific Theatre of Operations is truly an ambitious undertaking. But if the previous games are any indication, we can expect more great things and, of course, more great adventures.



The game looks better than ever, but the real impact ultimately comes from the poignant setting



Medal Of Honor: Rising Sun

system: playstation 2 / developer: ea la / publisher: electronic arts / available: november 2003

Black 9

During the unveiling of enticing action-RPG Black 9, top creative dude and Taldren CEO Erik Bethke went into exhaustive detail discussing his first project since StarFleet Command 2, revealing the many intricate aspects of the game's construct and enthusiastically marking the unique qualities Taldren believes give the game its engaging charge. For all the talk of weapons and skill development, of mercenary future-tech gadgets and body reconstructors, of vehicular travel and nanotechnology and the many other durably slick sci-fi goodies ingrained within this distant world, one obvious comment stuck with me: Bethke expressed that he wants you to be excited to simply exist within Black 9's reality, intimately connected to its actions and reactions, consumed by the sight of a completely imagined future place.

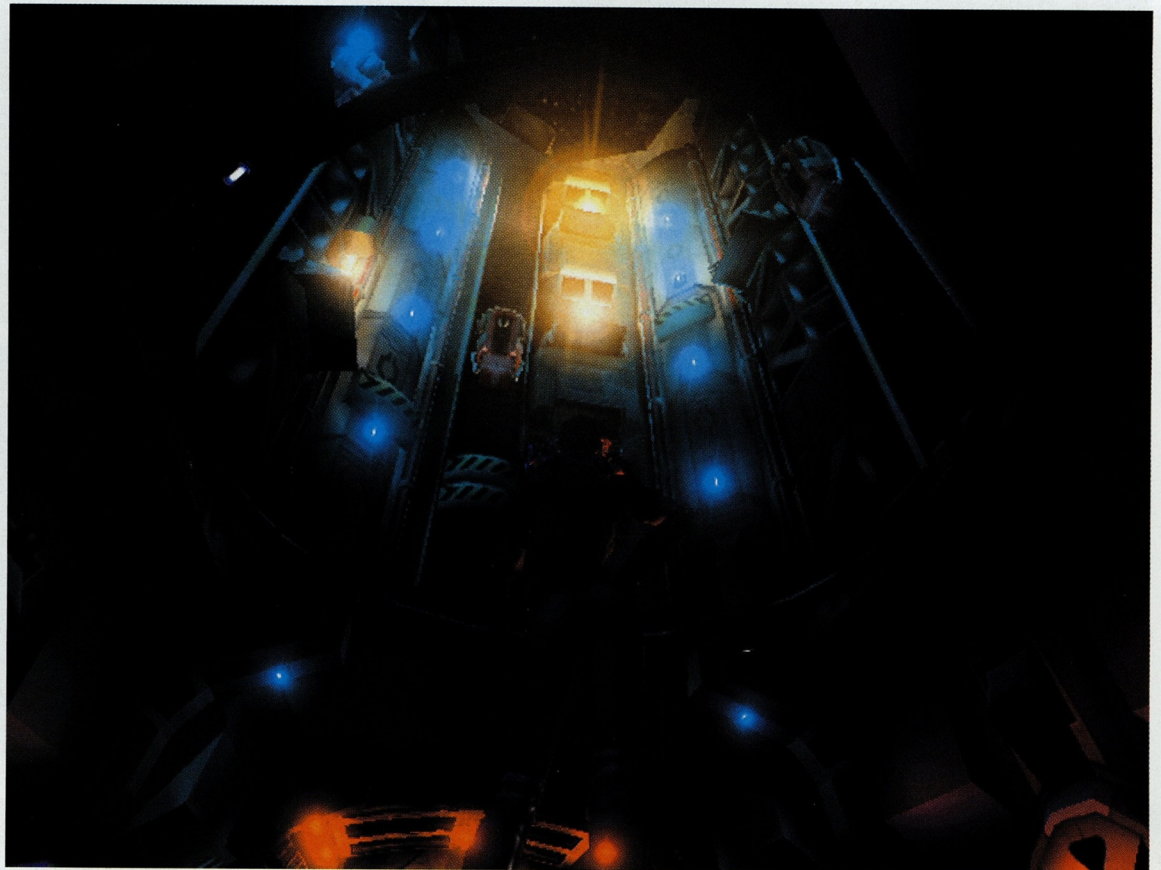
I love hearing a gamemaker say this, and few actually do. Easy to say, difficult to accomplish, and yet what auspiciously grabs me about Black 9 is the enormous appeal of its distinctly rich backstory and ideal settings. You'll travel to such atmospheric marvels as Mars, the moon, Seoul, Macau and Shanghai, befriending dwellers and supplanting the hostile as you aid in the dubious work of the nine Illuminati. Befriending the Illuminati could prove disastrous; they live in age-old enmity, each struggling for their own omnipotent hold on the global community. One of the more powerful of the Illuminati, the Genesis group, positioned primarily in Hong Kong, believes the world has been on an evolutionary path to eventual

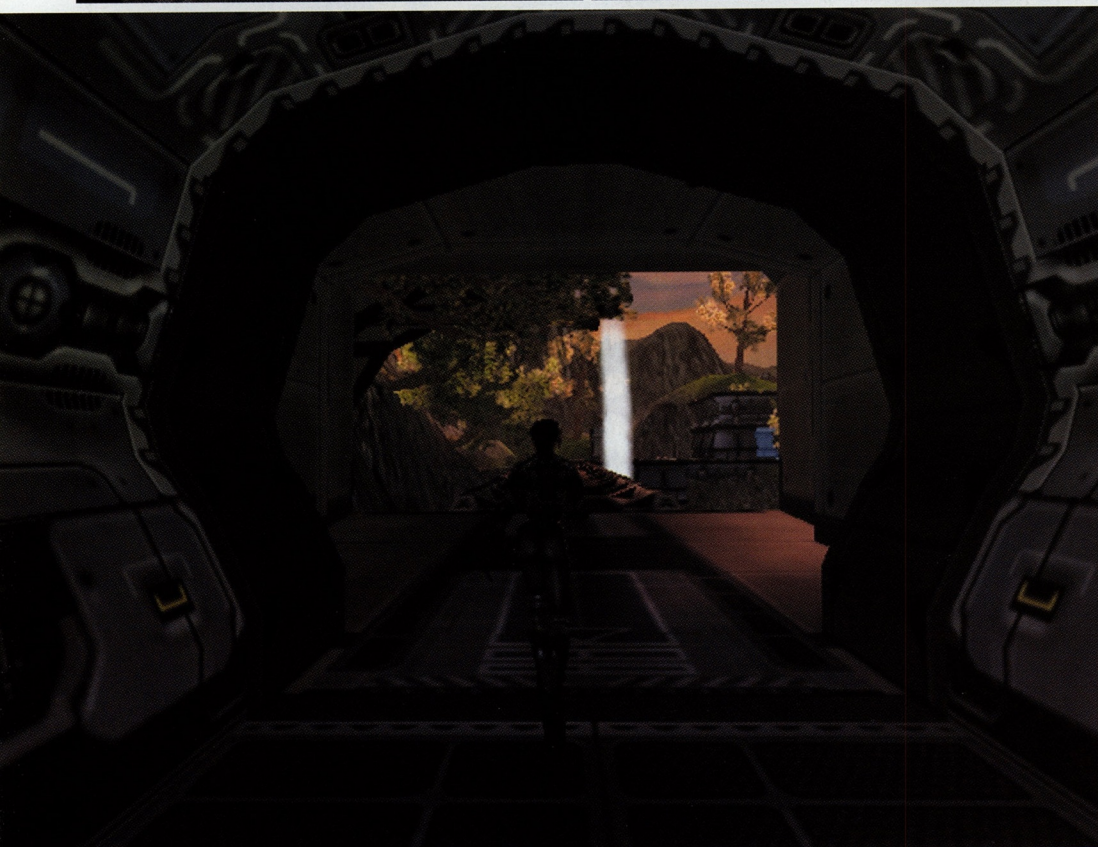
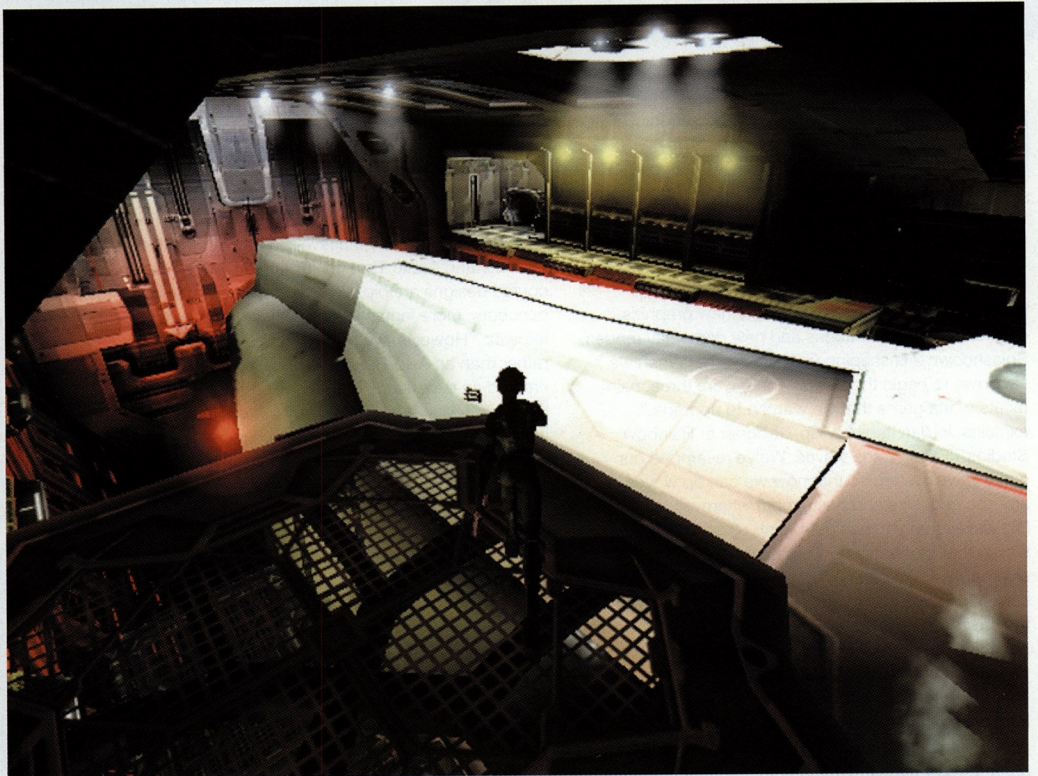
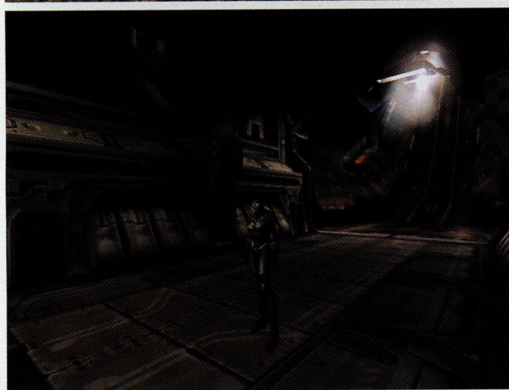
AI sentience, which will prove beneficial to the ways of the living before consuming everything in its path and producing a supreme being who will eradicate life as we know it.

While other Illuminati are out for domination and insidious control, some are content with quieter status and wealth, like the Glimmer A.G. Working mostly in Europe and centralized in the lower Rhine river valley, Glimmer A.G. got their start supplying anyone who had the cash for their rebel services, and now their empire has grown to supply nearly 70 percent of the world's arms. Privacy in this new world order is dead; Glimmer A.G. even controls surveillance satellites located throughout asteroid fields and along the moon, Mars and Jupiter networks, funneling their gathered resources to both science and radicals such as the New World Order. What all this scheming and struggling could one day precipitate is part of the wound mystery you must unravel.

Black 9's setup is endless and complex, its ideas fascinating and full of grand possibility. The role-playing qualities of the game, for me, hold the most interest; in echoing Taldren's words, this is not an action game for the Quake sensibilities, yet there will certainly be more than enough moments to, say, ignite soldiers, spies, assassins and pretty much anyone else who gets in the way of death-sticks like your mercenary's flame thrower. I've always found exceptional appeal in this type of game, and Black 9 most definitely has my attention.

The game's visual ideas are rich and exciting. And what you can't see is the exhaustive story and dense character building...





"Black 9's setup is endless and complex, its ideas fascinating and full of grand possibility."

Black 9

system: xbox, playstation 2, pc / developer: taldren / publisher: majesco / available: november

Bigger, better, faster

Splashdown 2

words tom ham

Rainbow Studios has built its reputation on creating great racing games. They've developed such key titles as ATV Offroad Fury 1 and 2 and Motocross Madness 1 and 2. At a recent press event held by THQ, Rainbow was on hand to debut the sequel to one of their most popular racers, Splashdown.

Almost every aspect of Splashdown has been revamped for the sequel. Sporting a new graphics engine, new types of tracks and new gameplay modes, Splashdown 2 is shaping up quite nicely. "When we sat down to begin the design, there were three main facets of the game that we wanted to upgrade," explains Jordan Itkowitz, Co-Designer at Rainbow Studios. "First off, the waves. We've revamped our entire wave system so that now we can do waves of any shape or size and place them wherever we want. Big waves that you can get big air off of. Dynamic waves that trigger along with animated elements in the environment. We can now also do downhill courses, currents, rapids and multi-tiered elevated pools. Then, the environments. The courses in the first game were beautiful, but aside from the race action, they were pretty static. We wanted to push that a lot more in this game, and for inspiration, we started looking to the kind of experience you have on thrill rides at theme parks. You know, big visual spectacle, amazing sights around every corner, dynamic environments full of triggered events, and big, bold, creative themes. It's not just racing anymore, it's cinematic racing. (And it's got more explosions than you could ask for.) Finally, we've changed our art style to match the experience we're presenting. It's a lot more stylized and hyper-real than the first game, very colorful and lush."

Playing the game was like riding a roller coaster. Taking inspiration from thrill rides and theme parks, the outside courses are out of control. Highlights include racing through a sinking pirate ship or amidst falling buildings. This is racing on steroids, and it never looked so good. "Like the levels in games like Hydro Thunder and Arctic Thunder, Splashdown 2's outdoor course designs are big, over-the-top themes and concepts, more fantastic than real world," explains Itkowitz. "However, we're still doing a three-lap race rather than an A-to-B, and because of that, we've created an experience that evolves over the course of the race. Triggered events in lap 1 affect things that happen in laps 2 and 3, and so each race has a kind of narrative arc to it. I think players are really going to be surprised by what they find on each course—we've got some great, thrilling moments for you."

There will be 40 different tracks in Splashdown 2. Eight of them are the big cinematic outdoor courses, 12 are indoor stadium tracks, 12 are Technical Time Trial tracks and six are freestyle courses. "Technical Time Trials is a very stripped down, back-to-basics mode for people who just want to enjoy the physics of the watercraft racing across the waves," says Itkowitz. "No ramps, no stunts, no Performance Meter, no arcade gameplay. Just 12 tight, technical courses, about 30 seconds per lap...it's more in line with what professional watercraft racing really is."

As you can see, Splashdown 2 is well on its way to surpass the original. With its incredible course design, brilliant graphics and excellent physics engine, we can't wait for this game to come out. In the meantime, check out our exclusive screenshots. You can close your mouth now.



Splashdown 2 features a slightly tweaked visual appearance. Notice the more cartoony characters

"Taking inspiration from thrill rides and theme parks, the outside courses are out of control."

Splashdown 2

system: playstation 2 / developer: rainbow studios / publisher: thq / available: june

A new breed of first-person shooter

XIII

words brady fiechter



Cel shading has now officially become the dependable style of design when you need a game to look like a cartoon. The novelty is wearing off, but that doesn't mean it's not uniquely appealing, and developers are quickly starting to use the technique in more interesting, creative ways. The first and only first-person shooter to dip into the cel-shading paintbox is the very cool, very delayed XIII; the additional year of commitment to the game has been fruitful, revealing Ubi Soft's insistence for a standout title.

The game draws its inspiration from the popular French comic book of the same name, successfully using its bright, sharp visual stylings to reflect the ink on the pages. When the enemy takes a hit or an object gets decimated, text splashes of "BOOM!"s and "BANG!"s drive home the comic-book effect. It may look a little less threatening than the typical gritty FPS, but XIII certainly packs a punch with more than

enough bloody action in the wake of the many effective weapons like the uzi, crossbow and bazooka.

There will be plenty of opportunities to run and gun, but gameplay variety stretches out in several directions. Early in the adventure, you're stuck in a prison where stealth is the path to freedom, and eventually you'll be breaking in to other facilities that require other types of specific approaches to victory. Typical weapons won't always do. If you see a chair, grab it and smash it over your victim's skull. Is that a bottle and ashtray on that desk next to that very hard, very dangerous looking fire extinguisher? Yet more objects to bludgeon someone with. Even a shard of glass can be used as a deadly attack to the throat.

I love this genre, but I'll admit there is far more refining and improving going on than clever new invention. XIII is being built to offer something more, and it's succeeding.


When's the last time you played a first-person shooter that looks like this?

"Typical weapons won't always do. If you see a chair, grab it and smash it over your victim's skull!"



XIII

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox, pc / developer: ubi soft / publisher: ubi soft / available: september



Boom! town

XGRA

words dave halverson

Accclaim's Extreme G racing franchise has been pushing the technology envelope since its inception, through a combination of blistering speed and ambitious futuristic atmosphere. The initial Nintendo 64 game carved a path with blazing speed, twisting tracks and surgical control until yielding to a better 64 sequel that still sputtered under limited technology. Moving onto the PS2 and GameCube, XG3 cranked up the volume considerably, adding massive courses (often in nearly full view) with twisting armature and serpentine design, fleshed out characters, and the perfecting of the Sonic Boom—the game's trademark component, which produces an eerily silent blur beyond the sound barrier, providing a feeling that hasn't been duplicated since. With XGRA, Cheltenham Studios seeks to improve on the formula further still, by bolstering the game's already dizzying array of attractions to create the pinnacle of futuristic racing.

INTERVIEW

Chris Whiteside, Lead Designer, XGRA



This fourth installment in the Extreme G series seems a vast departure from previous versions. Most notably, the Sonic Boom wasn't present in our demo, in favor of boost strips. We presume the Boom is safe and sound...

Whilst XGRA is a huge evolution over XG3 and the racing genre as a whole, we have and never will have any intention of getting rid of the beloved XG Sonic Boom. This will be present in the full version of the game and is markedly cooler than the Sonic Boom found in XG3. We have included speedstrips in this version, as we wanted the game to play even faster, and to increase the depth of gameplay. Having areas to hit in the game that increase the player speed just adds such a cool new feel to the whole game. Furthermore, we will be adding a whole new host of speed-related VFX to compliment the Sonic Boom. Watch this space.

So whilst retaining *all* the elements of XG3 that the consumer enjoyed, we have also added loads of new features to really bring the game to life and also to compete on a worldwide level with racing games as a whole. To give you an idea of the evolution, here are a few new mechanics that we have introduced to the game. Real Teams that headhunt the player, offering contracts and secondary missions that are like minigames within the races, six new race types, a brand new weapons system sporting 26 weapons and no controller weapon cycling, nine different vehicles, 40+ unique races, a reactive pit crew, Intelligent Rider Communication—allowing the characters to speak to the player dependant on the game state, eight characters each with their own personalities and memory, destructible environments, a “real” motorsport structure with 16 non-linear championships complete with a governing body (XGRA) and a sports network company (SiNN) and to top the list off, completely redesigned tracks with multiple routes and secrets.

This really is the tip of the iceberg. We are intensely proud of putting in placeholders already and have plenty more to do between now and the turnover date.

I also noticed in the pre-beta version the absence of a screen presence for any of the characters, other than names and logos. Are they being inserted later? It would be a shame not to show off your lovely ladies and cool mecha drivers.

Well spotted. This is because we haven't included them in any of our builds yet. We tend to include systems and mechanics when they are near completion so when presented the viewer is able to see the reality of the feature in all of its glory instead of placeholders and then hyping them up. Communication is the key and whilst some teams are happy to hype stuff to the media, we prefer to let you guys and the consumer alike decide for themselves based on what we do show. We are very confident in what we are creating.

The characters in question are now present throughout the game. A great amount of time was spent from concept to final production stage of the characters, and therefore a great deal of thought has been put into their placement throughout the game. They are absolutely fantastic and everyone has their own particular favorite. A number of people have mentioned how nice it would be if we could buy them as toys...my favorite is Mark IV.

The characters in XGRA are far more than just visuals, however; each character has

XGRA combines the thrill of XG3 with wider tracks, even more speed, team battles and, somehow, even better visuals



his own set of attributes that affect the way the bikes perform in real time in the game. Furthermore the characters also have personality and memory, meaning that they will all react to different situations uniquely. So aside from using the characters on the select screen, they are also included in movies, on the bikes and in other immersive sections of the game. To give you a sense of the depth and immersion that XGRA encapsulates, they also talk to the player in game, each of the bikes in the game has a high tech HUD that reacts to a variety of different game states, one of which is the Character Imager. This neat little device allows the characters to talk to the player on a visual display dependant on the game state, each character has over 80 different speech sets depending on the situation, allowing us to ensure that there is no repetition. So to just give you a quick example, last year Gekko (one of our characters) rode for Starcom, the team that you have joined this year. Gekko has since left the team and Starcom are none too happy with him breaking his contract and they want you to take him out. So in the race, the player decides to fulfill his contract and fires on Gekko. Gekko then appears on the Imager acting brash, like he doesn't have a care in the world, all in keeping with his character, but the more and more damage the player does, the more frustrated and upset Gekko becomes in his communication until he is taken out. Similarly, characters will also talk to the player when contracted to hit him. Characters are essential to the gameplay experience in XGRA.

Tell us about the team and/or rival aspects of XGRA...

When we began to conceptualize XGRA we decided that we really wanted to create a world of motorsport that would evolve from what we are seeing presently in real-world motorsports. So we isolated the features that we thought the public could easily recognize and immerse themselves in. One of these aspects is teams and team rivalry. So many racing games allow

“Characters are essential to the gameplay experience in XGRA.”

"Simply put, this game will blow XG3 out of the water. We have retained everything from XG3, added loads of new gameplay dynamics and just polished it to the max."

the player to jump in a vehicle and race around with the primary goal firmly set on the player and not the team. We felt that throwing the player into the seedy world of this sport wouldn't quite be right unless he got a glimpse of the high rollers manipulating the sport through the teams, and it is in this way that we introduce our team mechanic.

We have eight teams in XGRA; each team has its own sponsors, weapons, vehicles, goals and rivals. The teams in XGRA are money-making organizations, just as they are in real life, and therefore they approach riders dependent on their own goals and the rider's performance. Mechanically, the teams look at the rider's performance and decide whether or not to make an offer based on that. The teams, when offering the player a season ride, also add a contract to the agreement; these are sub-missions that the player can choose to perform for goodies from the team. Better teams offer better bikes, but nothing is free, and also offer harder contracts whereas weaker teams offer poorer bikes and easier contracts. This allows the player to select his difficulty setting throughout the game based on his own confidence in his performance. It is a really cool system as it caters for all skill levels and enables the user to enjoy the game on many different levels and at their own pace.

As you have mentioned, the teams do have rivals; these are based on key situations throughout the game that unfold as the game progresses. This is something we are fine-tuning at the moment. But we don't want to leave you empty-handed, so these are some of the contracts that the teams currently ask the player to fulfill: destroy a specific character, take out a specific team, achieve a world record, destroy a rival's advertising hoardings and many more.

Our main aim in regard to the team mechanic is to immerse the player into the whole sport and to make them actually care about the team they ride for.

In the past, XG has been a very surgical endeavor, with tight tracks requiring memorization and precise tactics (although in XG3 I found the Leech key to success). How are you balancing the gameplay in XGRA?

Great question. Well, we have a number of primary systems in the game. XGRA is a much larger project than XG3 as I am sure you are aware. We have focused on delivering a product to the player that has a multitude of fun gameplay mechanics that all deliver. In terms of balancing, this could have been a logistical nightmare; however, through superb production and a focused team we have been able to balance and polish all of the systems to the highest quality. There is still tweaking to be done, but we are all looking forward to this.

In terms of pure gameplay, we have four major systems to balance: AI, contracts, pickup placement and speedstrip placement. All of which have to balance in unison to ensure that they all bounce off each other nicely. We don't want any particular system to shine above the rest, as we are trying to create one awesome package within each race. For example, the player's primary goal is to achieve a certain race position or higher; therefore we don't want the contracts to detract from this too much, just enough to cause a little panic. In the same way, we don't want to throw loads of speedstrips and pickups everywhere. Instead we place the strips in positions that we think the player will find fun and challenging and, due to the split route nature of the tracks, we very rarely put speedstrips and pickups next to each other; instead they are both placed on different split routes, forcing the player to make a gameplay decision on

the fly dependant on his game state.

Then we play the game over and over and talk about it and then refine it. If a system or placement isn't working out then it is removed. XGRA is all about quality and depth; to make a game with such high goals, the team must concentrate on everything equally and have a full understanding of how all the systems relate to each other and the player.

The course made available to us was much wider and banked than in previous games—does this run through the entire game?

We have varied the track widths throughout the game, and added loads of new set pieces and mechanics. The main reason for having wider sections in XGRA is to incorporate the new power slide, allowing players to glide across large turns. Varying track widths doesn't just allow for power slide mechanics, however, it also gives us more freedom in terms of speedstrip and pickup placement as well as forcing changes of player strategy on the fly in regard to combat and racing line. XGRA is all about immersion, variation and that elusive "wow" factor. We want to be constantly challenging and shocking the player. Too many games induce players into a pseudo-hypnotic state due to repetitive gameplay; we want the player to be on the edge of his/her seat constantly. XGRA will be an experience rather than a game, and this is the essence of the title.

Will there be more dicing between racers in this version? How many riders in each race?

We aim to have at least 16 vehicles in each race. "Rough and Tumble" racing was a primary goal right from the start of the project and we have already achieved this mechanic. In XG3, passing a bike used to be very clinical, the player would always just shoot straight past the vehicle, allowing no time to fight or even admire the quality of the bike model and texturing. The AI in XGRA now travel in packs of four and modify their position on the track in relation to the player's position on the track. In tests, this has lead to four or five bikes scrambling around the player, vying for position and attacking their rivals. It really does make a huge difference and we are amazed at the results.

I noticed you can target and shoot elements of the environment, sending them crashing down to the track below. Will this debris remain on the course throughout each race?

Debris from vehicles or scenery will remain on the track unless it is collided with, at which point it inflicts damage on the vehicle that hits it. This system was designed to change the layout of the track, forcing the player to use a new racing line in these areas.

What other new elements are you adding that we don't yet know about? Any new technology being deployed?

Well, we don't want to give everything away just yet. Let's just say that there are a few more game mechanics to be announced as well as a whole host of unseen visual effects and technology to be deployed.

Assuming XGRA will cover all three consoles, is there a lead platform? Will every version run at 60? Will any one be the best?

Each platform has its own strengths and weaknesses. That said, all platforms are approached equally in terms of base content and each will run at 60 frames per second.

Looking at your main competition—Quantum Redshift, WipEout, Tube Slider, and F-Zero—the XG edge has always been (aside from insane course design and gorgeous futuristic visuals) extreme speed and the adrenaline rush of breaking the sound barrier. Going forward with all of your new implementations, what are you hoping players will find most appealing this time

around?

Right from the outset, the team decided that we wanted to offer the player a whole host of game dynamics for the player to enjoy, and because our focus for the game is to create a real vision of futuristic motorsport we have plenty of areas in which to execute this. So I am sure the players are going to love the variation in the game and specifically the new progression and team mechanics as well as the new weapons, characterization, sub games and new modes. XGRA really is a global product and there is something in there for everyone, but at the end of the day we are aiming for total immersion. No single part of the game should be uniquely appealing; instead, the whole product is made to create an awesome experience and this is what we are gunning for.

The original Extreme G was developed by once-über-developer Probe. Have any of the original staff found their way to your studio?

We have a really experienced team who have worked on a multitude of triple-A titles. And whilst we have no one from the original team on this project, we have spent a great deal of time looking at the first two games and focusing on realizing the original team's goals.

How large a team is on the XGRA project, and how long has it been in development?

The game has been in development for 16 months and whilst the size of the team has varied during the project, we have had, on average, a team of about 23 top-quality staff...and to be honest, I have never worked with a more professional and focused staff in my career. This game required a very special team to create it and we have been fortunate enough to have this.

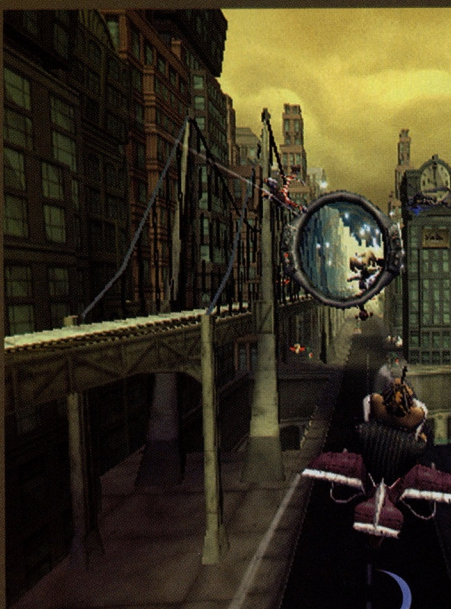
I noticed a choice of rock or dance music at the outset... most appealing, I must say! Are you licensing tracks or having feature artists create tunes?

We have a mixture of licensed and in-house music. The soundtracks are really cool and we have some really big names to announce soon. Furthermore, all the music was specifically chosen with the gameplay in mind rather than just getting big names. The fact that we have some of the biggest names in the industry is purely a bonus for us. Even the artists have taken the time to tell us how cool they think the soundtracks are. The consumer is in for a real treat and we are so excited about this element of the game at the moment.

XG3 was an amazing game—easily one of the most underrated (due to being under-marketed) racing titles in recent years. Can you top it? Do you feel the franchise is going to get the push and notoriety it deserves this time around?

Simply put, this game will blow XG3 out of the water. We have retained everything from XG3, added loads of new gameplay dynamics and just polished it to the max. To put it into perspective, the final championship in XGRA, of which there are 16, has all the features that we had in the whole of XG3. We loved making XG3 and feel a duty to the game and its fans to ensure that this game is everything and more that the consumer wants.

Already we have had tons of exposure thanks to the press and our fans. Our marketing departments have been great as well and are really excited about this product and have been a real asset to the team all the way through the development process. To be honest, in some ways we have been shocked at the response already and are proud to have this kind of support, and in the same way that we feel a duty to XG3, we have the same feelings in regard to the press and consumers alike to deliver not only the best futuristic racing game in the world but the best racing game, full stop.



Places to go, Indians to terrorize...



I love torpedoes

Freaky Fliers

words dave halverson



It's been way, way too long since anyone cared or dared to innovate beyond Diddy Kong Racing in the all-but-left-for-dead kart racing category. Too many copycats soiled retail trousers for their own good—from Woody Woodpecker to the abysmal Antz Racing—and the kind died like a Fox sitcom. Nevertheless, par for the course in the game industry, where there is a rotting corpse, opportunity eventually beckons.

If Freaky Fliers was anything less than a reawakening—tuned to please and then some—Midway would be better off dragging Gauntlet out again; wait, on second thought, no one deserves that. However, after three and a half years in development—which shows a refreshing commitment to quality—it's all that and a pair of Double D's. Before I touch on what makes it tick though, I have to ask: where the heck were all of you for Dr. Muto? Midway finally breaks away from tired arcade ports to give us something fresh, and no one showed. Go see the Doctor.

With Freaky Fliers, Midway again delivers a fully fleshed out, lovingly

tweaked, character-rich game, but this time the dial stopped on racing/adventure, a genre just waiting for a shot of fun-juice. Rather than shovel out the same old victory by power-up drivel, they've busted things wide open, almost literally. Freaky Fliers is 10 racing games wide and deep, and they make use of the space in more ways than just, well, space. Each course is a living, breathing world, where you can affect events, opening up speed funnels for you alone to use, among other very freaky things. Speaking of freaky things, the whole shebang is tied together by mini-games where you'll do anything from defend your fort from packs of wild banditos to escaping the innards of a human body, Osmosis Jones style. And when you're not watching the hour and a half of edgy CG (where things go bounce in the night), there are some 30 truly f'd up characters waiting to be unlocked. Moreover, it all runs at 60 fps across all three platforms. Shame our version had more bugs than Anna Nicole's privates. I'd love to just say "go get it," but that'll have to wait until all the boards are nailed down.

"...after three and a half years in development—which shows a refreshing commitment to quality—it's all that and a pair of Double D's."

Freaky Fliers

system: ps2, gc, xbox / developer: midway / publisher: midway / available: july

Don't play with yourself

Brute Force

words dave halverson



If Brute Force plays as good as it looks, we're in for some sleepless nights

Talk about having big shoes to fill... Being billed as the next Halo for the Xbox is like dropping into the half-pipe after Tony Hawk pulls a 720. Nevertheless, Brute Force certainly looks as if it has the tools and the talent, even though it's not trying to be Halo, but rather a different style game altogether, though one that's as immersive. Taking the team aspect of single- and multi-player gameplay to soaring new heights, the intent is to blow us away with a combination of graphics and AI by allowing up to three players to join a game in progress and come and go as they please. Flying solo, you assign commands to your 'bots, but at any time they can be overridden by a real player, giving the game both unrivaled flexibility and replayability.

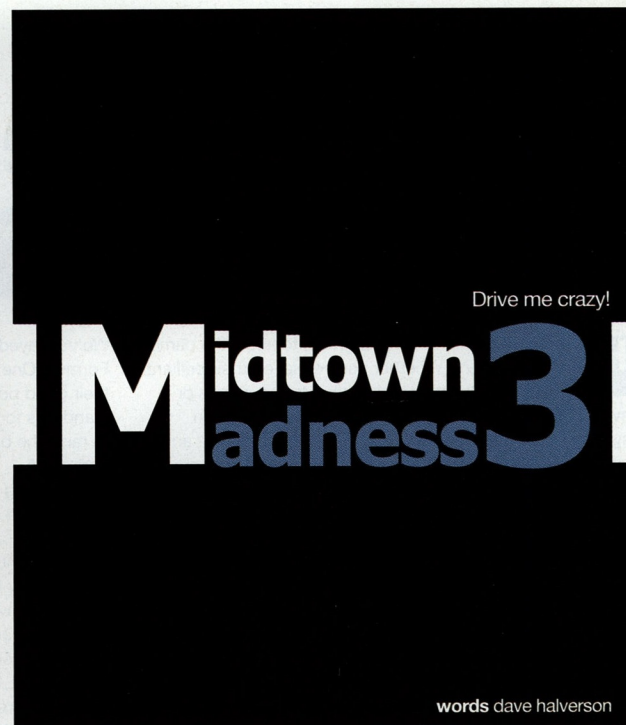
Think of Brute Force as a tactical shooter with a sci-fi edge (evidenced by its diverse classes: reptilian, hottie, android or nut job) and slightly less taxing feel (one-hit deaths don't check in), along with third-person gameplay, something I personally prefer greatly over first-person shooters; I hate being an arm, so sue me. If I'm a chick, I wanna see my polygons. Each character possesses indigenous attributes and a back-story all their own, so imagine the possibilities, given the expanse of this style of game and the variations possible through the single- and multi-player options. With any luck, we can soon forgo replaying Halo, and focus our sights on the next big green thing.

"Taking the team aspect of single- and multi-player gameplay to soaring new heights, the intent is to blow us away with a combination of graphics and AI..."



Brute Force

system: xbox / developer: digital anvil / publisher: microsoft / available: may



F using the insane antics of games like Midnight Club, SF Rush, Wreckless and Runabout with top-notch, cutting-edge graphics and technology, Midtown Madness 3 appears to be the end-all, do-all arcade driving experience, offering a bevy of speed thrills from soaking-in sights to cut-throat mission ops and balls-out racing. Single Race affords the option to Cruise (hopefully that's self-explanatory), Blitz (a race against time based on your car of choice) or Run Checkpoint (Midnight Club-style crazed circuit racing), although Work Undercover mode is where the true meat resides. Here you'll find a collection of missions that take you from lowly delivery boy to special agent as you assume various occupations as a means to a specific

end—competition notwithstanding. Whether you begin your adventure in DC behind the wheel of a pink '59 Cadillac Eldorado or Paris in a new Turbo Beetle (or would that be Turbo New Beetle?), your rival is all up in your stuff and profusely vocal about being so from the word go.

True, it's all been done before in some form or another, but in Midtown, it's all in the execution. Every possible variable is refined; the cityscapes are flawless urban sprawls dashed with realistic seasons, the cars are picture-perfect representations of the real things, and the gameplay is balanced skillfully between the real and the absurd. Think the madness and mayhem of Runabout or Wreckless, with environments on par with the very best racers of the day.

"True, it's all been done before in some form or another, but in Midtown, it's all in the execution."

Not just another day at the office...
Peer pressure is at an all-time high in
Midtown and only the skilled survive



Midtown Madness 3

system: xbox / developer: microsoft game studios - digital illusions ce / publisher: microsoft / available: june

Our T. Ham goes deep undercover doing the ICS honors

IndyCar Series

words tom ham

Hardcore racing fans have grown to know the name Codemasters. Whether you've played their brilliant Pro Race Driver or their Colin McRae games or even TOCA back in the day, Codemasters have been synonymous with the best in racing games in the biz and now the legendary UK-based developer is getting ready to unleash their latest racing game, IndyCar Series. Sporting the official license of the Indy Racing League, this latest racing title is destined to be one of Codemasters' greatest.

At the opening day of the Indy Car Series at the Homestead Miami Speedway, Codemasters invited play to check out a race and not only meet the folks who made the game possible, but get first-hand impressions of the game from the racers themselves. Yeah, it was tough, basking in 80-degree weather, watching beautiful racing babes running around and clubbing it in South Beach. What can I say? It was work.

"We were looking for a publisher/developer that had the knowledge of racing games," explains Kenneth T. Ungar, senior vice president, business affairs for the Indy Racing League. "Codemasters really know their stuff. It was a great fit. This game has been a lot of fun to work on.

We've played all of the other racing games out there, 989's Formula One and EA Sports' F1 2002, and they all have their good points, but quite frankly, they didn't meet our standards for a racing game. I feel IndyCar Series is going to raise the bar for racing games and we're proud to be a part of it."

Releasing on both PS2 and Xbox, IndyCar Series is poised to be equally exciting as it is realistic and authentic. Imagine 33 cars racing at the same time at insane speeds. And since this is open wheel, your tires will be literally inches away from your opponents. The slightest wrong move will have you crashing into the wall. "This is what racing is all about," says Tomas Scheckter driver for Target Chip Ganassi Racing. "IndyCar Series truly captures what the IRL is all about. The racing is incredibly realistic. I felt that EA's game was a little too arcade like. I know some guys that use this game as a training tool." There are five main modes in IndyCar Series: Quick Race, Indy Car Series (which is the whole 2003 racing season), The Indy 500, Master Class (a series of training exercises that teaches you everything from the basics to advanced racing techniques) and of course Multiplayer. There is

also a Player Profile mode that allows you to create your own racer and have them compete in the circuit. "What blew me away about the game is how real the drivers in the game are," exclaims Buddy Rice, driver for Red Bull Cheever Racing. "They'll remember you if you cut them off during the race. I also like the visual style of IndyCar Series. When you're racing in Indianapolis, you are really there. Every aspect from the grandstands to the offices, everything was re-created perfectly."

Although I only got to dabble with a preview rev of the game that was only 70 percent complete, I'm totally blown away by it, especially the overall speed of it. The game convincingly delivered the sensation of driving 200MPH around the tracks. Needless to say it was a total adrenaline rush. The framerate was solid and the detail in the cars is unmatched. It would've been nice to have an online feature, but unfortunately there isn't any. "The best part of IndyCar Series," says Sam Hornish Jr., driver for Panther Racing, "is that it doesn't hurt crashing into the wall."

We'll be sure to have a complete review of IndyCar Series next issue. In the meantime, check out our exclusive pictures from the race in Miami and the game itself.



But does he really use Purex? That is the question...

"Although I only got to dabble with a preview rev of the game that was only 70 percent complete, I'm totally blown away by it, especially the overall speed of it."

photos michael tran



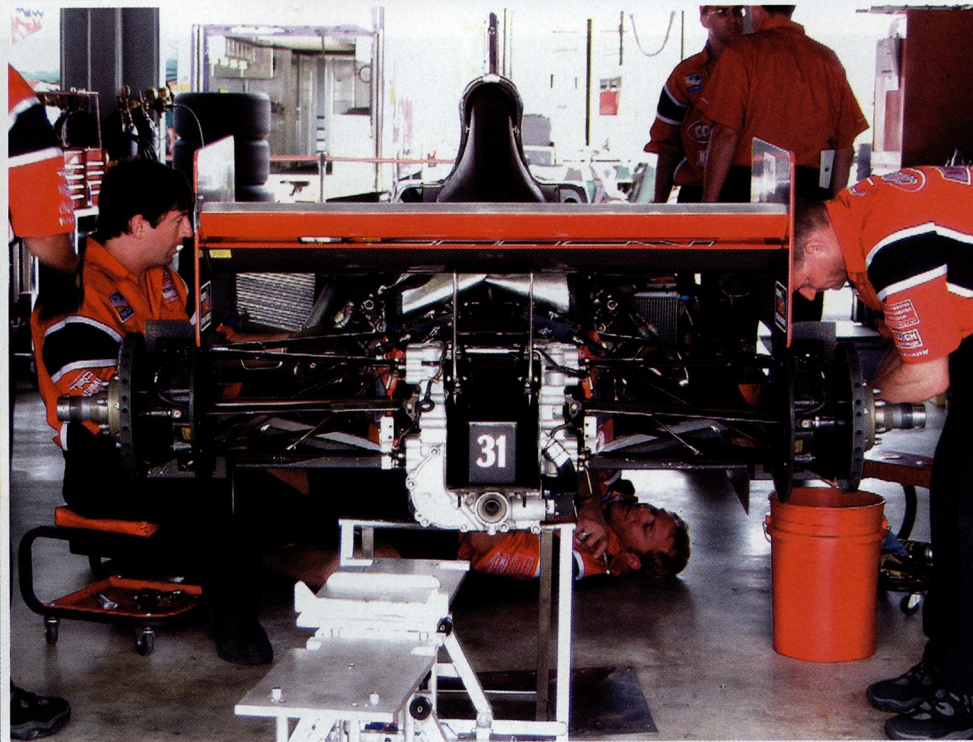
Upper left: Natalie Salzman of Bender/Helper Impact with The Firestone Firehawk mascot.

Upper Right: Poster girl for Indy Car Racing League: Elaine Irwin Mellencamp

Right: Tom Ham, Dario Franchitti & Dan Wheldon of Klein Tools/Andretti Green Racing Team

Lower right: In the garage with Kelley Racing - Al Unser Jr. car

Below: Helio Castroneves of Marlboro Team Penske

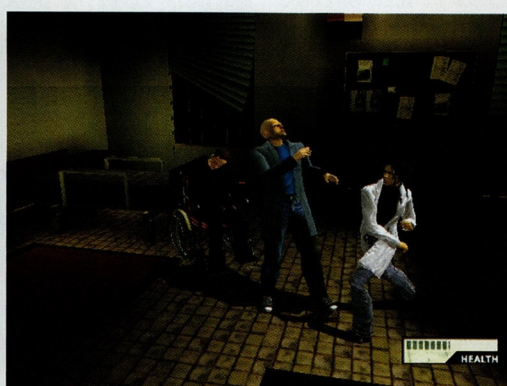




Gladiator

system: ps2, xbox, pc
developer: **acclaim manchester**
publisher: **acclaim**
available: **fall**

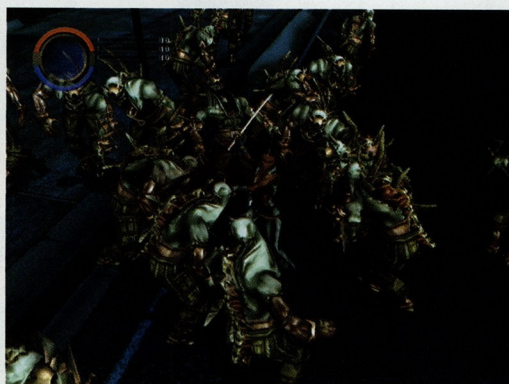
Mythological, brutal and bloody—Acclaim's sweeping epic, *Gladiator*, is an ambitious project aimed squarely at people who enjoy eating large poultry off the bone and belching in public. Super Models have all the fun.



Alias

system: ps2, xbox, pc
developer: **acclaim cheltenham**
publisher: **acclaim**
available: **fall**

Alias fans the world over wait with baited breath for Acclaim's upcoming game of the same name...so they can jam Jennifer Garner into a corner and do naughty things with the camera. You know who you are.



Hunter: The Reckoning - Redeemer

system: **xbox**
developer: **high voltage software**
publisher: **interplay**
available: **q4**

Because the only good zombie is a dead (again) zombie, *Hunter the Reckoning* marches on. So, in the interest of splattering old decaying corpse goo everywhere we possibly can, here are the latest screens from *Redeemer*, the Xbox exclusive of the two upcoming sequels.



Cy Girls

system: **ps2**
developer: **konami computer entertainment japan**
publisher: **konami**
available: **q2**

From the Takara toy line "fighting heroines" comes the story of two very different (and very sexy, baby) crime fighters: *Sky* and *Shadow*—Cy Girl operatives with unique abilities, attributes and pasts. *Sky* is the brawnier of the two, well trained in handling long-range combat weaponry, while *Shadow's* skills as a ninja are better suited towards close-quarters combat. They both make me horny.

Downhill Domination

system: ps2
developer: incog
publisher: scea
available: july

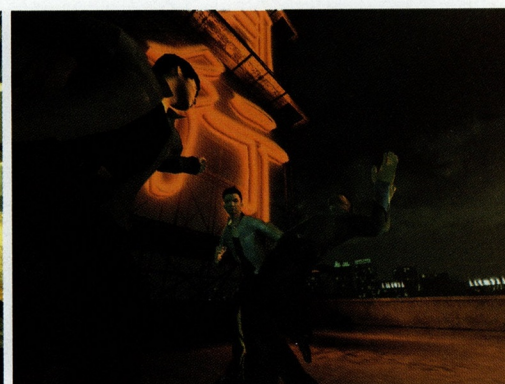
The creators of Twisted Metal: Black and War of the Monsters set their sights on downhill mountain bike racing, and from the looks of it, they have a clear vision. The first- and third-person action boasts 14 riders and three unique course styles including Mountain Cross, Technical Downhill and Freeride. This is great because my seat kills my ass.



Rise To Honor

system: ps2
developer: scea foster city
publisher: scea
available: fall

Kung fu master Jet Li and fight choreographer Cory Yuen, along with Sony's Foster City Studios, are hoping to redefine action gaming by incorporating never-before-seen fighting movement into a realistic cinematic environment. My money's on them pulling it off.



Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel

system: ps2, xbox
developer: interplay
publisher: interplay
available: q4

Described as a gritty and darkly humorous third-person action/adventure, the Brotherhood of Steel's mission is to maintain peace in the grim post-nuclear world of Fallout. This undoubtedly involves lots of ranged combat in which one or more players get to blow the snot out of the wasteland's mutant army.

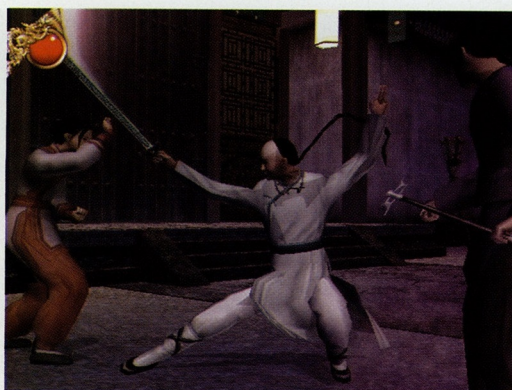


Galleon: Islands of Mystery

system: gamecube, xbox
developer: confounding factor
publisher: interplay
available: q2

Toby Gard's (creator and lead designer of the original Tomb Raider) immense, character-driven action/adventure epic, patterned after The Voyage of Sinbad, is reportedly nearly complete after many, many years in development. Hopefully he's on his game, because this concept is the stuff gamers dream about...when they're not dreaming about Halle Berry.





Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

system: ps2, gamecube
developer: genki
publisher: ubi soft
available: september

Genki have taken their time in developing a game that will deliver the incredible look, feel and grace of the film (going as far as using Mandarin dialogue with English subtitles), which isn't getting any younger, so they best get on with it. Along with swordplay and gravity-defying combat, there is said to be both crouching and hiding.



Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II

system: xbox, ps2
developer: black isle studios
publisher: interplay
available: q3

This one excites me in an unnatural way. Dark Alliance redefined top-down action, so, to do it one better, Dark Alliance II will feature more monsters, graphically stunning environments, five new and unique customizable player characters to choose from, a new item-creation system that will allow players to create their own ultimate magical artifacts...and that water!



Otogi: Myth of Demons

system: xbox
developer: from software
publisher: sega
available: september

Looking like 3D Mystic Defender, Otogi is set in ancient Japan and steeped in real-life folklore and mysticism. Raiko commands 30 weapons and a dozen types of magic to dispense demon warriors and, apparently, massive bosses. Blending frenetic fast-paced 3D action with deep RPG elements, this looks like yet another stunning Xbox exclusive from Sega.



Maximo vs. The Army of Zin

system: ps2
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: fall

One of the best 3D platformers ever devised, Maximo: Guts to Glory—patterned after Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, one of the greatest 2D platformers ever devised—will soon have its second bark at the moon as Capcom exhumes six new environments (and six new bosses to go with them) for Maximo to battle in The Army of Zin...as he tries to keep his pants on.

P.N.03

system: gamecube
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: september

One more reason why 2003 is shaping up to be the year of the 'Cube is Capcom's P.N.03, an action game starring a female soldier named Vanessa Z. Schneider, whose dark past is about to catch up with her. When a colonial settlement turns into a killing field after a CAMS (Computer Arms Management System) goes haywire on the planet, she takes matters into her own hands. CAMS killed her family, and it's payback time.



Onimusha Buraiden

system: ps2
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: 2004

Pulling from the gorgeously atmospheric world of Onimusha, Onimusha Buraiden is a unique action-fighter that allows up to four players to battle it out in various arenas set in the world of feudal Japan. Special attacks and weapon use are straight out of the Onimusha universe, with tons of additional techniques to bring up the complexity.



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One winner to be chosen July 1st will win \$500.00 cash, but we'd like to thank everyone who participates in advance.

play magazine

064

Primal

Few games, if any, boast the detail, adventure, and gameplay combination Cambridge Studios has infused into Primal



Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance

system: ps2 / developer: koe japan / publisher: konami

There's no question that MGS2: Substance is great, but is it great enough to warrant purchasing? Depends. If you somehow missed the original MGS2, then this is a must-have, and if you breathe Kojima, you can't go wrong here either. In addition to the complete MGS2, there are more new missions (over 500!) than you'll know what to do with, the highlight being Snake Tales, and all of them are well-designed, challenging, and a lot of fun. This version's a hair better than the Xbox one, too. —Chris Hoffman

play rating ●●●●●



Mega Man Battle Network 3

system: gba / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom

Playing Mega Man Battle Network 3 was like returning to a Saturday morning cartoon after a commercial break: bright, playful, completely kid-friendly, and pretty much in the same place as where I left off. Almost everything about MMBN3 is so similar to previous games in the series, it's hard to tell that you're playing a new game. The same characters are featured, they're going about the same routines, frequently using the same weapons, and heck, they're even doing it in the same environments at times. Fortunately, the Mega Man Battle Network series is a fine action/RPG/strategy hybrid with a cool combat interface and a nifty

weapon system that puts an enjoyable spin on the collect-'em-all mentality that got started by Pokémon. If you haven't played Battle Network before, then this game will provide its share of thrills, and if you are a big fan, then you'll appreciate tweaks like a nifty character modification system and new fighting styles. But considering that this is the third game in the series (or fourth if you count the Blue and White versions separately) in less than two years, and that the gameplay—especially the bland, isometric level design—is almost the same as the first, I'm not sure we need another sequel so soon. —Chris Hoffman

play rating ●●●●●



Command and Conquer: Generals

system: pc / developer: ea pacific and westwood studios / publisher: electronic arts

Borrowing from today's headlines is the latest real-time strategy game from Westwood Studios (now EA Pacific) and Electronic Arts, Command and Conquer: Generals. Showcasing a brand new 3D engine, fantastic graphics and the excellent gameplay we've come to expect from the franchise, Generals is not only a blast to play, it is the best looking real-time strategy game to date. The three factions (US, China and the GLA) are extremely well balanced, each with unique units and super weapons. War was never supposed to be this much fun. —Tom Ham

play rating ●●●●●



Mega Man & Bass

system: gba / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom

It's truly a testament to Capcom's design skills that after so many years and so many games, the Mega Man concept still manages to work exceptionally well. All the classic elements that made the series great can be found in Mega Man & Bass, from disappearing blocks to instant-death spikes. The new playable character Bass is a worthwhile addition to the formula, and the inclusion of 100 hidden info discs is a very cool extra for Mega Man aficionados. It may be predictable, but it's fun. —Chris Hoffman

play rating ●●●●●



Transworld Surf: Next Wave

system: **gamecube** / developer: **angel studios** / publisher: **atari**

Besides paddling faster than most boats, the surfing action in Next Wave is second only to Kelly Slater's, the reigning kahuna of surfing games. The training is done right, simple and visual, and the game is super easy to pick up and play, with nuances tucked away for the long career ahead. The T. Hawk-style laundry lists can get a bit tedious (and you have to finish every task to move on), but the mods on airs, floaters and tube rides make for some super-fine wave shredding. The replays are limited, but the soundtrack is hot, with the option to change entire styles, from punk to metal. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Evolution Snowboarding

system: **gamecube** / developer: **kceo** / publisher: **konami**

I liked ES on the PS2, but I *really* like it on the GameCube. Although it's still a tad rough around the edges, it's a great concept, made better on the Cube: an American theme (hostile snowboarding) presented through comic book panels, orchestrated with Japanese panache, awash with a soundtrack by Slipknot featuring some of the best metal around...now that's a tossed salad. Attempting to take down an evil organization bent on controlling the world's weather, you do battle against the patrons of a Marilyn Manson video through mission ops and boss battles built on vid-game-like levels, with depth to burn and sick controls. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



State of Emergency

system: **xbox** / developer: **VIS** / publisher: **rockstar**

I still can't figure out why this game has such dominion over me. As I was partaking in its cartoon brutality (all shiny and new!) yet again, I was thinking; you know, this is somewhat repetitive, and the architecture is so simplistic...then four hours later, at like 3:00 AM, I'm struggling with whether or not I should pull an all-nighter. But I think I've figured it out. For one, the game now looks markedly better, the models—especially ones key to the plot—are more detailed, there are nice new (and improved) effects all around, and the play buttery smooth. What really makes State so hard to shake,

though, are the short but sweet missions. Although they're often carried out on the same turf, they're as addictive as free shrimp. I keep promising myself just one more, and minutes melt into hours. VIS really knows how to keep things moving; fail and you can pick things back up in a few seconds, no loading, no nada, and the ops themselves are tuned to perfection. Now add visibly better AI, crazy new multiplayer modes, new moves, the freedom to rip your own sounds, and a 20-dollar price tag, and you've got, guns down, the single best value available for the Xbox. —Dave Halverson

play rating ●●●●●

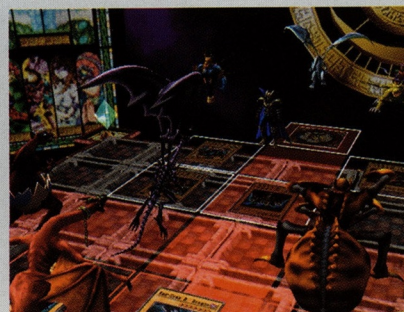


Murakumo: Renegade Mech Pursuit

system: **xbox** / developer: **from software** / publisher: **ubi soft**

The company famous for mediocrity—From Software—keeps right on dispensing it, this time in a nicely polished, highly stylized, well-produced mech chaser where you hunt down and eliminate rogue labor mechs called A.R.K.s (Artificial Reflexive Kineticoids). Despite all of the well-meaning polish, Murakumo manages to get old before it even gets going, due to a clunky interface, poor design, and one of the hokiest English dubs in recent memory. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Yu-Gi-Oh! The Duelists of the Roses

system: **ps2** / developer: **kece** / publisher: **konami**

Playing the role of the Rose Duelist, you've been summoned from the future to medieval Europe to settle the score between the Lancastrians (rightful heirs to the throne of England) and the Yorkists (the royal pain in the ass keeping your seat warm). What follows is a beautifully produced, rule heavy, text heavy, story heavy, lore heavy, chess-like card battle royal that could have Yu-Gi-Oh fans pulling more all-nighters than the graveyard shift at Del Taco; makes my head hurt. —DH

play rating ●●●●●

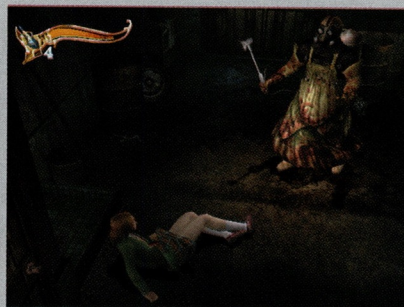


Harbinger

system: **pc** / developer: **silverback entertainment** / publisher: **dream-catcher interactive**

Hyper-detailed, isometric-view, Diablo-style PC games I find impossible to resist, likely because I'm a child of 16-bit, and Harbinger is a good one that could have been great. Light on backstory and heavy on action, Harbinger has you exploring a massive ship, eliminating all things cyber in typical lead-the-character, search-and-destroy fashion, much like Diablo. Of course, I prefer controlling my character, but, as these games go, the AI and balance between ranged and melee attacks comes off very well, and its dark steely environs brim with fine detail. It's not Meat Puppets, but it's still a fun, dark ride. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Clock Tower III

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **sunsoft** / publisher: **capcom**

I've modestly enjoyed the mood-driven Clock Tower series, but not without admitting to its considerable flaws. For this sequel, easily the best of the three games, a lot of repairs have been made, leaving some minor annoyances in their place—awkward character movement, pacing problems, arbitrary object placement. Filling the gap are excellent cinematic, effective visuals and solid settings. As an experience of mood and horror—the villain delivers scenes of shocking violence—CT III works. —Brady Fiechter

play rating ●●●●●



Batman: Dark Tomorrow

system: **xbox** / developer: **kemco** / publisher: **kemco**

The desecration of Batman is at hand. You thought Schumacher killed it? Think again. I'm not joking when I say the people who purchase this game would be better off if the case was empty. Knowing it stank like egg farts, Kemco wisely sent out review copies after it hit the streets so it could do some business based on the name, and a bat-tastic case that screams, "Buy me!" The animation on Batman is roll-on-the-floor funny, like he's got a bat pole up his poop chute, the camera is literally the worst ever, the Batmobile looks like a friggin' Austin Martin, the gameplay is as insipid as it is atrocious, and it still manages to be chock

full of bugs. That and it loads every tiny little piece of Gotham, which now looks like crate city, devoid of any architecture. The fact that DC let this game live only shows how desperate they are to get anything on the shelves to soak in some of the good gamma being spread by Marvel, and it's just not right. No one should have to see or play a game like this; it can only serve as a means to make consumers wary and afraid. Superman for the 64 was bad—very, very bad—but in this day and age, for a license this big to get this massacred... Dark Tomorrow is now the worst game I have ever played. —Dave Halverson

play rating ●●●●●



Disney Sports Snowboarding

system: **gba** / developer: **disney interactive** / publisher: **konami**

So here's where the good Disney Sports games have been hiding! DS Snowboarding is a really impressive, highly addictive game, due in no small part to its formidable 3D, which, though a tad framey, affords realistic-looking runs with smooth embankments and scaling accoutrements on the sides. Playing as Minnie, Mickey, Chip and Dale, Goofy, Donald or Pete, the set up is kinda like a mini 1080, complete with varied tricks (rotation, flips, misties, and specials) along with GBA and GC connectivity to swap boards, trick cards, etc. Very nice. —Dave Halverson

play rating ●●●●●



Disney Sports Basketball

system: **gamecube** / developer: **disney interactive** / publisher: **konami**

Disney Sports Basketball, like most Disney games, is nicely produced and quite polished. Unfortunately, applying polish to a flawed design doesn't make it shine. The game looks the part—set on disco-tastic futuristic courts—but the play is slow, rubbery, and uneventful. And what's the cut-off age for these characters now? Like seven? If video killed the radio star, Nickelodeon killed the Mouse. A female duck in heels vs. Spongebob or Zim? Get outta town! —Dave Halverson

play rating ●●●●●



WWE Crush Hour

system: ps2, gc / developer: pacific coast power & light / publisher: thq

If you look past the strange license, you'll discover that this car combat game is actually...fun. So the graphics aren't anything special, the play isn't too deep and the humor is misguided, but there are a good number of well-designed play modes, albeit mostly variations on the deathmatch and capture-the-flag. Control and physics are also appropriate, multiplayer is a blast and there are a good number of unlockable characters. It's no Twisted Metal: Black, but you can do worse for \$20. —Chris Hoffman

play rating ●●●●●



Summoner: A Goddess Reborn

system: gamecube / developer: cranky pants / publisher: thq

Cranky Pants' G-Cube port of Volition's ambitious action-RPG may be a better game overall than the PS2 template it's lifted from. I only wish CP hadn't messed with the queen's face (I think someone had a Xena fetish). Regardless, this is a big, sweeping epic with a deep party and magic system, a fully fleshed out universe, gorgeous locales and excellent character models. The only real drawbacks are the characters' lack of connectivity with the ground, due to limited animation schemes, and a few hang-ups in the lock-on fighting system; otherwise, this is beautiful stuff. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon

system: gamecube / developer: red storm entertainment / publisher: ubi soft

Players got their first taste of Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon back in 2001. Showcasing excellent AI, photo realistic graphics and great multiplayer capabilities, it undoubtedly deserved all the praise it received. This past November, the game hit the Xbox delivering the same excellent gameplay of the PC version, complete with online gameplay. After a piss-poor port onto the PS2, the game has shown up on GC and it's one of the worst ports I have ever seen. The bulk of your time will be spent in Campaign mode. Here you play through 15 story-driven missions, ranging from your basic search and destroy to hostage rescue and reconnaissance. The game does the preliminary stuff rather well, like outfitting your

team members and assigning their rules of engagement—it's all pretty straightforward. But out in the field, it's a whole different story. The idiotic AI cripples the gameplay to the point of ridiculous. Players will find themselves backtracking to their teammates who have forgotten their routes. And when they do form up on you, they're usually standing in plain sight, and before you know it, your team is dead. The same level of intelligence holds true for enemy units. Even though their fellow members are getting picked off around them, they seem perfectly content staying where they are. Coupled with lackluster graphics and weak animations, this Tom Clancy game is destined for the recycle bin. —Tom Ham

play rating ●●●●●



Godzilla: Domination

system: gba / developer: wayforward technologies / publisher: atari

Think King of Monsters only without the impact afforded by the Neo Geo and you've got Godzilla: Domination. GD has its heart in the right place, but WayForward (Scorpio King) were doomed from the word go on this one. Creating an overhead monster fighter where up to four can link-up and play on a tiny screen is just too tall an order. The animation and effects suffer as a result, giving this game too 16-bit a feel. For the GBA, 'Zilla should have been planned as a no-nonsense 2D beat-'em-up. This just isn't fun. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Samurai Jack: The Amulet of Time

system: gba / developer: virtucraft / publisher: bam! entertainment

A cartoon as cool and stylized as Samurai Jack deserves a game to match, and Virtucraft Studios deliver. The Amulet of Time (which Jack must assemble so he can return to the past and defeat the evil wizard Aku) is a big, meaty, bells-and-whistles platformer set up much like a sprawling Castlevania SOTN with a similar equip system, map, array of special moves, and character interaction. The art style is pure Jack (therefore minimalist), the animation well suited (Jack's kimono even blows in the wind), and the music and dialogue are Cartoon Network quality. —DH

play rating ●●●●●



Your PS2, evolved

Primal

words dave halverson

Anticipation is truly one of the virtues of being a gamer: always having a new experience to look forward to, knowing that legions of artisans are toiling away 24-7 for our ultimate fulfillment. For me, the benefit of early glimpses is bittersweet; it's cool getting to feel a game for the first time, but it also takes away from that special feeling the first time you hold wrapped case in hand, especially when it's a game you've anticipated, and blocked out days of your life to fully defile.

Whenever I follow a game closely—playing early iterations, trying desperately to form an accurate appraisal of its innards—getting the final product becomes an epiphany; was I right to peddle its prowess, or was I caught up in the promise of something different? In *Primal*'s case, I played little in the overall scope of the game early on, yet was still able to form strong opinions based purely on instinct—so I feel doubly vindicated in past statements branding the game a truly cinematic endeavor. It's as free-form as a game can possibly be while retaining the qualities needed to remain a compelling interactive experience.

We often speak of the lines blurring between cinema and gaming as we see more and more story woven into the fabric of modern games. Nevertheless, games where you play the story, like *Halo* or *Metroid Prime*, are still in somewhat short supply. *Primal* takes this premise right to the edge. If there is one surprise playing the final, it's where that edge is located, in a vague but omnipresent similarity with *Metroid Prime*. This is a completely different game; however, it relies on very much the same premise: exploration, discovery and lore within a living, breathing virtual universe. The difference is that *Primal* is tailored for a wider (if not more mature) audience, where *Prime* was pretty much reserved for

hardcore gamers. *Primal* also introduces a real script and more involved story. So, is this the next evolution of that style of game? I would have to say, most definitely, yes. Where *Metroid* unfolds amidst one massive linked world, in *Primal* you access the four worlds of Oblivion from a central nexus, two of order and two of chaos, where the balance between the two hinges on your success. Like *Metroid*, a tiny icon on the map gives you the general location of the next "event," otherwise, you would become consumed in the game's immensity, left to further the plot by combing literally every inch of a given domain—repeatedly. There are no arrows to point the way, and no set path. You can ask your companion Scree for vague hints, but otherwise, you're usually lost, which I find the most admirable trait a modern game can have. If one facet of gaming must replace hardcore difficulty, it's genuine exploration and discovery mixed in with mid-level dexterity challenges.

As Jen, rocker babe, waitress extraordinaire (and as it so happens, part demon), you travel Oblivion, a world just outside our own, working in tandem with Scree to solve each world's potentially catastrophic brush with Chaos. From these four worlds—Feral, Aquis, Aetha, and Djinn—the game derives its unique amalgam of exploration, cinematics and battles, existing in a constant state of flux, switching forms appropriate to each. Scree, a small, soft-spoken, yet stern stone gargoyle (and the catalyst from which the story emanates), provides wall-crawling capabilities to reach places Jen cannot, and works as both a guide and as a source of energy for Jen, converting essence into life force. Jen on the other hand must do all of the fighting (well, almost all; Scree's coolest trick is the ability to posses and manipulate massive statues... handy in battles Jen couldn't hope to survive)

"It's as free-form as a game can possibly be while retaining the qualities needed to remain a compelling interactive experience."

Primal may well be the best looking PS2 game to date. The attention to detail is truly staggering



Right: Feast your eyes on the finest video game tree of all time



and, at times, the negotiating as well. The give and take between Jen and Scree, and more importantly, the way it's orchestrated, is pure genius. Primal has a fantastic script and countless animation routines to actually back it up, giving it the look and feel of a film or novel in game form, rather than the reverse. And it's brilliantly told by seasoned players. When Scree and Jen have a verbal exchange, the mannerisms are natural, in concert with the script. As far as I know, this hasn't been done before, at least not to this extent, and it adds greatly to the overall experience. Primal is the benchmark from which all such games will be measured in the future. As well, the plight they face is inventively brought to life. Primal is full of lore, dialects, ritual, religion, hierarchy and peril, drawing you in with pristine sound effects, interrupted only by orchestrated vignettes that serve to heighten the drama as the game subtly transitions. So much has been poured into every facet of this game, I could speak volumes on each species alone, but I'd rather that you discover them for yourself.

The other aspect of the game, hand-to-hand combat, is brought off much like Star Fox Adventures or Zelda, with a keen lock-on system accented by special moves and blocking. Jen has a fierce, bloody, proximity-sensitive finishing arsenal, which she can unleash while her prey are stunned, and she possesses the ability to change shape in real-time whenever necessary (setting off a beautiful parade of animation and light) should she be surprised. At first the fighting seems tame, but once you enter Aetha things get imminently harder. Wraiths attack in packs, have long reach, and are genuinely foul, scary beasts. All of the species in the game possess a measure of intelligence.

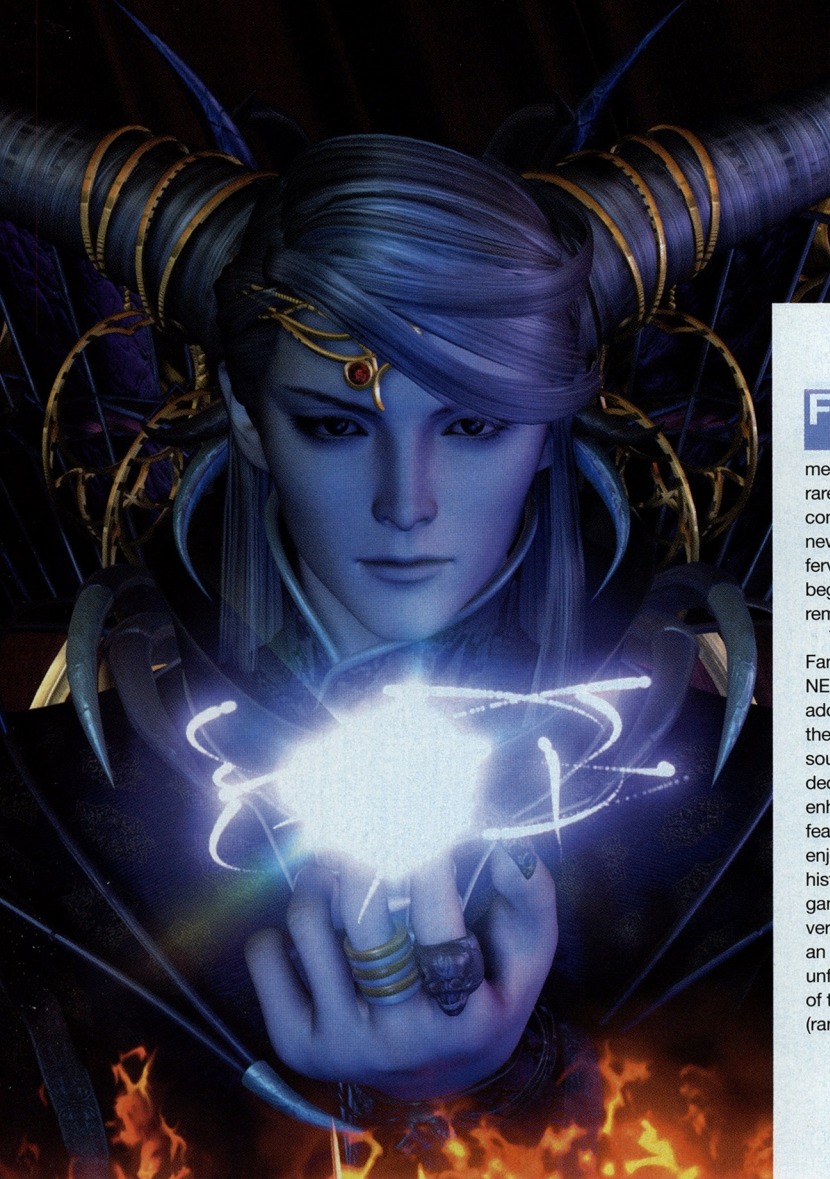
Speaking to the visuals for a moment, you'd be hard pressed to find flaw in this system-defying feat of polygon magic. Trees blow in the wind (the best trees ever in a video game, that is), weather- and water-filled worlds look and feel stunningly realistic, the architecture (especially the decaying kingdom of Aetha) is such that you can almost smell the earth and stone, and the lighting and effects are simply superb. The collision in the game, should you choose to explore it, is also groundbreaking. When you run up stairs, you'll miss it...creep up, however, and watch those knees feel their way to the next step. Both Scree and Jen will always position themselves realistically on the terrain, regardless of steps or incline.

Ultimately, I believe people's perception of Primal will be determined by how intrigued they are by the game's cinematic flow versus how much joy they derive from the game's combat. I found the pairing intoxicating. It's also important not to judge the game until you've completed at least the first three worlds, and fully taken in the scope of its story and combat. Primal does not show its cards (those would be Tarot, by the way) all at once, but rather slowly builds to a climax as all great tales do. Be wary of any reviews that don't say the same—I pity anyone who doesn't see the beauty in Aetha, from the peasants' village to the royal palace. It alone is an achievement in every facet of gaming. Beyond Primal, I am, however, somewhat torn regarding Cambridge Studios. I'm not sure which I'd like more: a PS2 MediEvil or a Primal sequel. If I had my druthers I think I'd like MediEvil first, followed by Primal 2 at the PS3 launch. Regardless, they could make a game about paint drying and I'd be the first in line.

By the end of the game you'll feel like Scree is a part of the family. If only he'd quit getting stoned at Christmas...

"You'd be hard pressed to find flaw in this system-defying feat of polygon magic





This is where it all began...

Final Fantasy Origins

words chris hoffman

Final Fantasy is, without question, the premier name in RPGs. Characters like Aeris, Porom and Celes forge memories and emotional experiences that can rarely be rivaled as far as video games are concerned, and the fans eagerly await each new title in the series with an almost religious fervor. Now, Square is taking us back to the beginning with Final Fantasy Origins—the remakes of Final Fantasy I and II.

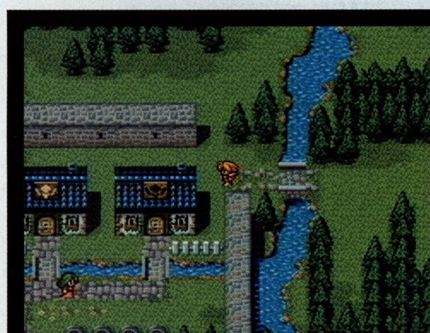
There are a few ways to look at Final Fantasy I. If you loved the game back on the NES and still like it today, you'll absolutely adore the Origins version. Compared to the 8-bit incarnation, this version looks and sounds amazing (though the graphics are still decidedly SNES-era), and there are loads of enhancements such as dashing, a quick-save feature and an Extras mode to add to the enjoyment. You might still enjoy FFI as a sort of history lesson if you somehow missed the NES game, but, realistically, that lesson includes very little story and no characterization...if ever an RPG was all about gameplay, this is it. And unfortunately, the gameplay consists of one of the harshest enemy encounter rates ever (random battles every few steps) and hours

of tedious level-building. Personally, I'm glad RPGs have progressed since then.

On the other hand, Final Fantasy II corrects almost all the archaic ways of its predecessor. For the first time, English-speaking players can bear witness to FFII's fully realized cast, substantial storyline, and FF mainstays like Chocobos and Cid...in essence, those elements that defined Final Fantasy and paved the way for RPGs for years to come. Magic and combat have been substantially refined, and a few unique features—a proactive leveling-up system not based on experience points, and a keyword system that lets you engage in conversation—really add a new dimension to the gameplay. More importantly, FFII evokes a certain intangible—a hint of that same something that made me play the FF games for hours on end back on the SNES. Though I'd be foolish to say FFII is on par with legends like FFVI, it shines with the same light, and that, I feel, is high praise indeed.

Overall, Final Fantasy Origins is a fine package and a can't-miss for fans of the series. Play Final Fantasy I as a blast from the past, but play Final Fantasy II simply because it's a fantastic old-school RPG.

"Though I'd be foolish to say that FFII is on par with legends like FFVI, it shines with the same light..."



Blasted pawns of the king!
No one can stop me now.



FFI

The graphics are almost identical to the Japanese WonderSwan remakes



"What's gonna happen to the world?"



FFII

It may look 16-bit, but the gameplay is timeless

Final Fantasy Origins

system: psone / developer: squaresoft / publisher: square / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

High-octane street racing to make you sweat

Midnight Club II

words brady fiechter



First stop, the gritty heart of Los Angeles, where the serpentine streets and alleyways bend and turn down to the blinding brilliance of a sun-drenched coast. The racing is wide open, never restricting you to a rigid path. Every competition takes on an entirely new dynamic, offering you countless miles and an extensive array of adrenaline-soaked street-racing rivalry. Once you've mastered the inventive art of turbo drafting and learned the intricate layout of the massive city course—the game demands hours of honed technique—Midnight Club II takes off even more in the surroundings of a convincing Paris and Tokyo.

Rarely does a racing game smoke with such blistering intensity. Midnight Club II is all about crazy speed and pinpoint driving. It's exaggerated in its look and feel, but the balance between physical realism and fantasy-tuned fun is so engaging that you begin to forget that a racing game could be fashioned any other way. As a sequel, Midnight Club II betters the original in every way: faster, more precise, better city design and an overall more solid feel and presentation.

Most races require you to pass through several checkpoints before locating a final stopping point deep in the city. The streets are packed with activity and open to multiple paths, setting up several moments of insane cross-traffic near-misses. Earning new cars and eventually the right to drive motorcycles keeps the speeds consistently climbing to insane levels, and it is here where the game really separates itself from the pack: the control is so tight and the courses so well constructed around the enormously fun and frantic driving technique that you can't help but be amazed at how adroit your command of the race becomes. Before the start of each new section,

MCII sets you up in a cat-and-mouse game with a random competitor roaming the streets. Even these quick chases can be a blast, functioning as a clever way to learn the city as the car you're chasing takes you through the nooks and crannies of the area.

Racing solo will keep you locked down in Midnight Club II's dusky circuit for weeks, cursing at the fraction-second losses while gradually improving towards an effortless mastery of consistent victories. If you get too good, it's on to the online arena, where up to eight cars can be a part of everything from capture the flag to straight-edged racing to a sort of hot potato. Midnight Club II may come across as a shallow, limited racing game on first play, but give it your time and you'll be treated to one of the best of its kind on any system.

The city streets are massive and convincing, full of shortcuts and hazards

"Rarely does a racing game smoke with such blistering intensity."

Midnight Club II

system: playstation 2, xbox / developer: rockstar san diego / publisher: rockstar / available: now



play rating ●●●●●



Run Like Hell

Things that go bump all the time

words dave halverson

"Making a game capable of re-creating the tension level of Ridley Scott's original *Alien* is no easy task."

Where's Ripley when you need her?
Better Run Like Hell...

Making a game capable of re-creating the tension level of Ridley Scott's original *Alien* is no easy task. Between establishing story, setting, compelling characters, a convincing xenomorph, and that very particular ambience, a lot can go wrong. Little does in Interplay's *Run Like Hell*. Its *Alien* vibe comes through loud and clear along with tinges of *Blue Stinger* and probably a few other case-specific titles depending on how many galaxies you've visited.

Looking over the shoulder of one Nick Conner, played like the real thing by Lance Henriksen, the name of the game is search-and-destroy (and hopefully find a few bodies that still have their limbs attached, including Nick's hot fiancé). Returning from a science trip to the mining station Forsetti, where he's living out his remaining days of military service in exile, Nick finds the place overrun by an alien species that is not only turning the crew into hamburger, but also redecorating in alien corpuscle; in other words, they're moving in and moving the inhabitants out...by way of teeth and claw. The bio-organic enemies

range from small and fast to immense and tough as nails, and they all react differently to the person behind the controller. Your initial alliance is with a peculiar alien played by the busiest man in video game voice-over, Clancy Brown (*Starship Troopers*), who gives a great performance. When you're not helping each other, you're on your own, collecting rounds, weapon upgrades, door codes, re-establishing power, and helping the odd survivor help you; you know—busted up space station stuff. The trick is in the ambience, and Interplay nails it. The enemy in *RLH* is omnipresent. They come from the ceiling, behind doors, from around corners and through the floor, and they are all intelligent to some degree. The formidable task of eliminating the invading force in *RLH* supports the storyline on which the game hinges and the narrative is integrated skillfully throughout, via real-time and prerendered cutscenes, creating a relatively convincing sci-fi experience. This really is a quality ride.

One thing though—it isn't an easy one. No matter how weapon-savvy you may be, your arms will never allow you to easily dispense with the enemy. Don't expect to stand and shoot; sometimes you'll need to circle, sometimes use your surroundings to your advantage, and sometimes just run like hell. There are times when this game produces genuine spine-chilling tension, and that almost never happens in games.

RLH's only shortcomings lie in its slightly dated technology (Xbox bells and whistles such as reflections and bump mapping don't make the scene); the models, however, as well as the character design and overall look of the station, are skillfully laid. Bottom line: if you're a card-carrying son or daughter of Ripley (or sci-fi in general), *RLH* is a must play. The Xbox game offers a very cool new area, new creatures, additional rooms, and even cool new skins through Xbox live. Happy hunting.



Run Like Hell

system: xbox / developer: interplay / publisher: vivendi universal / available: april

play rating ●●●●●

The cure for itchy trigger fingers...

Iridion 2

words dave halverson

The Game Boy Advance is the top-selling game system on the market for many reasons—accessibility, ease of use, price point, available software—and considering the recent addition of the SP and TV attachment, all roads point to another record-breaking run for Nintendo, sole proprietors of the ever-burgeoning handheld market. With any luck, the future will bring us Treasure 16-bit classics like *Gunstar Heroes* and *Dynamite Headdy*, perhaps *Magician Lord* (please, please)...and Konami owes us big time. How about *Castlevania IV* or *Sparkster* (make that the *Genesis Sparkster 2*, please) or...the list goes on and on. Not to mention new original games that push GBA technology to its limits, like *Iridion 2*.

Shin'en has somehow managed to reach into the GBA and pull out a Neo Geo, offering up a game that, believe it or not, is on par with *Viewpoint*, the Geo's premier shooter, which came on a 74-meg cart four times the size of an SP. Since the GBA is pretty much the last bastion for the genre, this game is to be embraced. A shooter revival on GBA could render games like *Axelay*, *Thunder Force*, *Super Darius* and *Silpheed* viable again, so do your part.

Iridion II brings to the small (and now lit) screen drop-dead gorgeous visuals and an old-school shooter soundtrack, coupled with an intelligent shooting system and interface, beautifully rendered enemies, arcade and story play modes and even a gallery with a doorway of special effects. How'd they cram all this into a cartridge the size of a matchbook? Well, that's what we're here to find out, speaking with Shin'en's Manfred Linzner...



Interview

Manfred Linzner, Shin'en

Manfred, first of all, tell us who you are, and about Shin'en—where you hail from and what you've done in the past.

Shin'en is a smaller development company that focuses its efforts on just one or two games per year that we feel very passionate about. Shin'en was founded in 1999 in Germany. Since then, we have released three games for the Nintendo handheld systems.

I originally started at Shin'en as a musician and to date I have created soundtracks for approximately 80 GBA and GBC games. My secondary function at Shin'en is programming, which I find to be a great challenge on the GBA.

For the original *Iridion 3D*, I was responsible for all programming. For *Iridion II*, there were two programmers. All tools and front end programming (menus, intros, animated sequences, etc.) were done by

Bernhard Wodok. I created the in-game engine, did all the enemy programming, created the levels and of course all the music.

Does Shin'en as a company have an affinity for old-school gameplay found only on the likes of the GBA? And will you continue to develop games that push that spectrum forward?

We enjoy developing classic-style games. Our goal is to combine classic genres with up-to-date techniques, giving gamers new and unique experiences. We love to find new ways to stun the players with visuals and music they won't find in any other current GBA games available. We continually pursue developing games no one ever expected to be possible on the GBA.

What struck me about this game first, of course, were its visuals. The clouds in level 2-1...how did you achieve that? And the architecture throughout is amazing; what technique are you using? Is this the result of mastering the development tools?

The cloud level was one of our biggest challenges. Those stunning visuals are the perfect mix of excellent artwork and very heavy programming. Most of the in-game visuals were created by Florian Freisleider, who managed to create ultra-realistic background graphics without wasting valuable ROM space on the GBA. We combine rendered animations with real-time graphics. The trick is to use only tiny 2D graphics but make them look like solid 3D objects with geometric transformations.

As the original GBA development tools

didn't support anything close to what we had in mind, we needed to create a lot of custom tools to make it possible to cram 16 levels, 27 songs and nearly 240 enemies and objects into only an 8 megabyte ROM. Besides that, there are even more goodies in *Iridion II* to be explored.

The GBA as a system...is this the max it can do, or is there a beast within waiting to come out? Is it actually more powerful than, say, the Saturn or PS was, in terms of sprite-based and/or pre-rendered games?

All in all, the GBA has about 1/4 of the power available on the PlayStation. On GBA you can show 128 sprites on screen but only 32 of them can be zoomed separately. In *Iridion II* we had to overcome those hardware limits by coming up with some tricks allowing us



to show more than 100 zooming sprites on screen at 60 fps. However, on Saturn or PlayStation you have much more 2D graphic power.

You also have to consider that on the GBA you have to invest a lot of CPU time into the sound engine since the GBA sound chip is just a GBC one with two new digital sound channels. Because of this, all music and effects have to be mixed in real time.

Another real drawback of the GBA is the small internal ram of only 32kb. The external 256kb ram is only handy for decompressing stuff but it is too slow for heavy random access.

Does it have any polygonal power?

Yes, but if you already don't like PlayStation 3D graphics for their various clipping and texturing problems, then you don't even have to consider the GBA as a 3D machine. In my opinion, good use for polygons on GBA is only in the menus.

What's the sound chip like in the GBA? Does it consume a lot of cart space?

The GBA sound chip is primitive. In comparison to the GBC you have only two additional digital channels. It's really very simple, the sound chip can by default only play basic samples and so most games tend to sound very dull. However, with clever programming you can by far surpass even the audio quality of the SNES.

The SNES had eight sound channels. In Iridion II we use up to 32 channels on the menus and 11 channels in the in game. To save valuable ROM space we are using a lot of our real-time synthesis technology, which creates breathtaking instruments while only using a couple of bytes. Synthetic instruments also sound perfect at any played note while normal samples only sound good on the frequency you sampled them.

The whole soundtrack of Iridion II takes only 250kb ROM. Most other games

sacrifice two or more megabytes for sound so they don't have much space left for graphics.

We've also implemented a "music construction kit" in the title screen on Iridion II. Every time you start Iridion II, you will hear an entirely new title tune. The user can even adjust that title song in real time by changing drum patterns, melodies, chords and the bass sounds. You would need around five hours to listen to all possible combinations!

We got a lot of email from people that loved the Iridion 3D soundtrack, so we decided to produce a professional soundtrack CD that will contain music from Iridion 3D and Iridion II. It will be distributed through our website after the launch of the game.

How many megs is Iridion II—how many can the system handle?

Iridion II uses eight megs. The largest available cartridges are currently 32MB.

Iridion II differs from the first in many ways. The viewpoint is raised (and much better), there's an easy mode to get players acclimated, and the game seems extremely well polished, from the interface to the mission screens. What lead to these changes?

For Iridion 3D we had to create all our tools from the startup. Within less than six months we created the GAX sound engine and all our graphic and programming tools. The game was intended to be published with the release of the GBA. We also didn't know what other developers would offer on the GBA so we tried to deliver the best product within this short timeframe.

For Iridion II we had twice the time and a wealth of knowledge plus an excellent selection of custom tools. We were able to concentrate on the gameplay, graphics and music. Majesco was a big help as they really put a lot of effort in testing the game. They also had great ideas on making it all even better. Also, we had more people working on the game this time so everyone was really able to concentrate on their part. When the game got into beta testing we were very picky about every little detail and we changed and fine-tuned a lot to create the best game possible.

In the end we were all very satisfied and proud of Iridion II. Even after working on this game for one year I still enjoy playing it every day and trying to beat the testers at Majesco in the internet ranking system. Some of them are really damn tough!

I like the idea of difficulty select and of an energy gauge instead of one-hit death. You also allow the ship to scrape the sides without exploding but still give the illusion of collision. I presume this is to make the game more accessible

"Shin'en has somehow managed to reach into the GBA and pull out a Neo Geo."

while still providing expert players a real challenge. How much thought goes into difficulty and how do you test it?

Finding the right difficulty in a shooter can be pretty time-consuming. You want to make sure that everyone can play through the whole game, but on the other hand, a shooter without challenge is no fun at all. Due to this, the first thing we implemented in the game engine was a difficulty system that was incredibly flexible. We were not only able to give the player more lives, energy and power, we also changed a lot of the enemies' behavior, in regards to the difficulty setting.

Testing the difficulty of the game took about seven weeks with almost a dozen testers.

Iridion II seems to have a lot of similarity with the Neo Geo shooter Viewpoint. Was that game somewhat an inspiration?

Viewpoint is an excellent shooter with a lot of great visual ideas. Namely, the rotating gates in the clouds level provides a great nostalgic feel. Besides that, I think the similarity lies more in the general feel of the game rather than actual gameplay similarities. Our graphic style is much more detailed and realistic and we concentrated more on the aspect of using different weapons in the levels.

What are some of your all-time favorite shooters?

Gradius and R-Type did a lot for the genre and Viewpoint was a graphical sensation at its time.

As we all know, the GBA market is over-saturated, with a major dichotomy between great games and crappy games, which causes frustration and somewhat of a bottleneck at the retail level. However, that doesn't seem to apply where shooters are concerned—most of what's there is strong. Are you cultivating this franchise with that in mind?

Exactly. We believe that if you dare to develop a shooter on the GBA then you really have to make it the best shooter of its kind and something that really excites people. We've already begun developing some new and groundbreaking ideas for a possible Iridion 3, should Majesco decide to build on the Iridion franchise.

You've obviously seen the SP. We feel it may be the coolest device ever. Do you see this as a new beginning for the Advance?

We simply fell in love with this cool gadget. I think it will pull the GBA market into a whole new direction.

So what's next for you? Time to conquer

platforming or what?

Well, we already developed a platformer that got good press and is already sold out. Unfortunately, it was only published in Europe. However, we made videos of the game, which are available on our website: <http://www.Shin'en.com>

Tell me, as a developer, why do you suppose no one has really tapped the fortunes of the GBA by bringing out games like Magician Lord, or Treasure games like Gunstar Heroes or Dynamite Headdy? Does the GBA have problems with ports? Iridion II looks outstanding, yet it seems the system can't handle simple code such as Earthworm Jim. Can you explain its limitations? Is it a tricky machine?

The GBA is much more powerful than the SNES or Mega Drive. There shouldn't be a problem bringing those games to GBA for experienced developers.



Zone Of The Enders

The 2nd Runner

The next level of mech combat

words chris hoffman

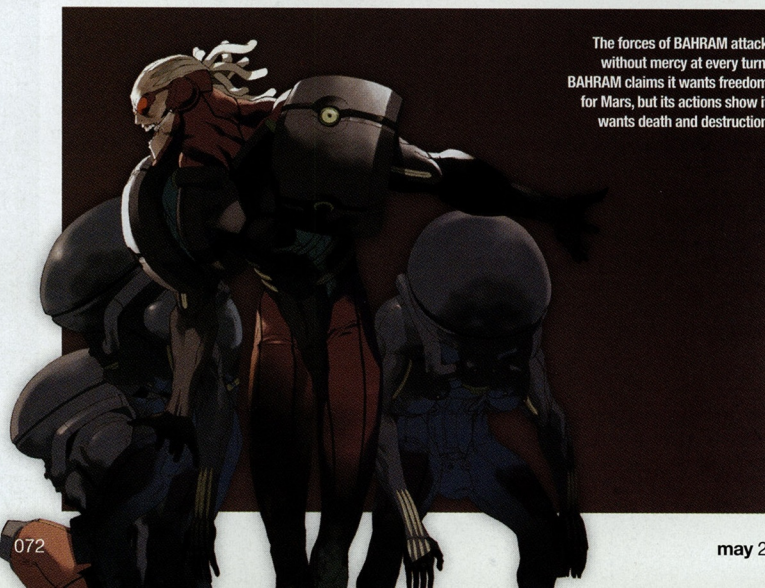


I am one with my PS2 controller. Just as Dingo Egret, the titular hero of Zone of the Enders: The 2nd Runner, is bonded to his orbital frame, I feel that the controller is a natural extension of myself as I play the game. I soar through the Martian atmosphere, I destroy an attack drone with several quick swipes with my energy blade, I cut a swath through enemy legions with homing lasers...all of it handling so fluidly, so gracefully, so perfectly tuned, that as far as pure action games go, I have nothing to offer in comparison, save for the original Zone of the Enders.

Though a handful of criticisms were levied against the original ZOE, I think none of them concerned the game's action, controls or aesthetics; these are also the areas in which the sequel excels. Each level is an adrenaline rush, a frenzied yet beautifully choreographed dance of destruction punctuated by a visual feast of light and particles as the BAHRAM forces meet their fate.

The criticisms have been addressed; more variety has been introduced to the combat. The aforementioned homing laser has been redesigned to target dozens of enemies at once, the sub-weapons have been made more useful, the grab attack is now an integral part of battle, and interactive battlegrounds let you tear off constructs when you need that extra punch. Enemies, environments and objectives are more varied; some levels feature an escort-mission mentality, and one mission in particular is a mas-

The forces of BAHRAM attack without mercy at every turn. BAHRAM claims it wants freedom for Mars, but its actions show it wants death and destruction

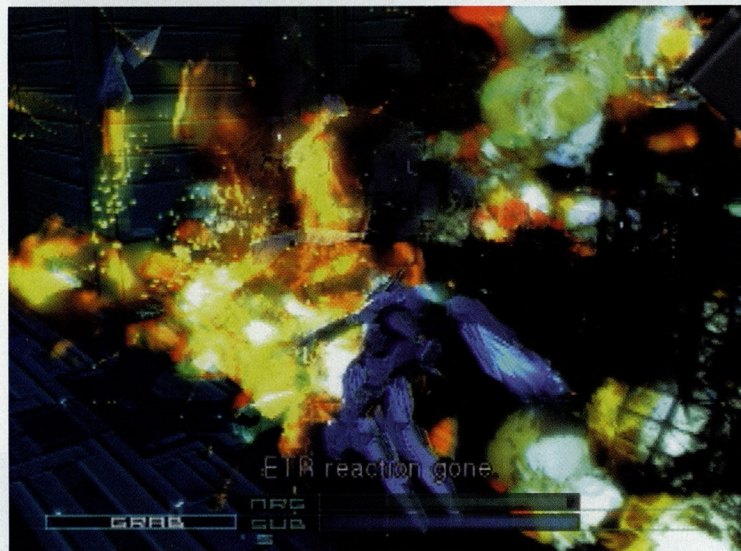


sive all-out war that must be experienced to be believed.

Another improvement regards the hero. Hard-edged Dingo replaces whiny Leo Stenbuck, and while Dingo isn't completely agreeable, it's in a good way. A more mature Leo does have a supporting role though; in a sequence that the old-school gamer in me thought was the best moment in the entire game, Leo appears in a transforming frame called the Vic Viper, complete with the requisite weapons and a remix of the Gradius music.

However, I'm not sure every change to ZOE2 was for the better. The game is thoroughly linear, and exploration is nil. New weapons are just handed over instead of discovered and downloaded. Perhaps these elements aren't necessary for the core ZOE experience, but I feel the game has lost a facet. And one complaint has not been remedied: not counting the unlockable bonus missions, the game is critically short...only a few hours long if you skip the cutscenes.

But when it comes to the raw energy and unadulterated action, ZOE2 has few peers. Not only does it live up to the standard set by its predecessor, it surpasses it. Were it a bit longer and had the discovery aspects been retained, it would have been even better, but a game that can meld itself to the player like ZOE2 does is a rare and wonderful thing.



Left for dead after a violent attack near the beginning of the game, Dingo Egret only survives by being bonded to Orbital Frame Jehuty

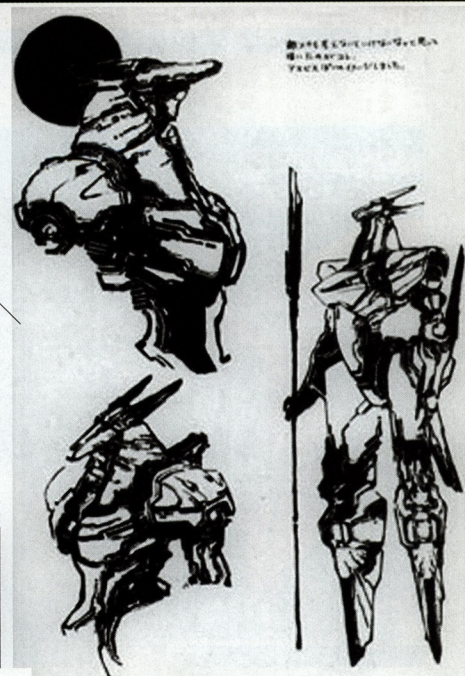


MECHANICAL DESIGN



Yoji Shinkawa Mechanical Designer

Yoji Shinkawa, late of Metal Gear Solid and the original Zone of the Enders again lends his deep talents to the mechanical design of Zone of the Enders: The 2nd Runner. Give the game one look and you'll see why Hideo Kojima is so keen on him.



"...when it comes to the raw energy and unadulterated action, ZOE2 has few peers."

Get into the horse racing game

Gallop Racer 2003

A New Breed

words michael hobbs

First, an admission. Before playing Gallop Racer 2003, I had never laid hands on a horse racing game. A long-time staple of the Japanese gaming scenes, with multiple competing series, the U.S. has only seen three thus far: Gallop Racer for PS, Gallop Racer 2001 for PS2, and now, Gallop Racer 2003: A New Breed (6 in Japan). And in all honesty, I was a little surprised to learn that two games were released here before this one, which shows how much interest I had in the genre.

That's not to say, however, that I had no curiosity, for when it comes to gaming, the Japanese generally know which side is up, so when Gallop Racer 2003 came across my desk, I popped it in with some sense of anticipation.

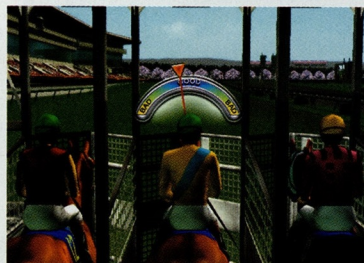
I really didn't know what to expect, but was enamored immediately by the cute custom jockey creation, which led me into the deep and expansive Season mode. Here, you can buy, breed, train, and race with an entire stable of horses if you choose. This aspect of the game can be taken as far as you like, even off the deep end if you're anything like the scores of addicted Japanese players.

What I actually enjoyed most about the game, however, was the racing itself. It's not a simple horse-whipping affair. Rather, it's a fairly nuanced rhythm and timing exercise where you must take many factors into account. It begins with the start, which requires a very well-timed button press (the timing of which is either easier or more difficult depending upon your horse's temperament). Next, you've got to find a good position among the other horses in the race. Some horses like to run at the front of the pack, others in the middle, and others toward the rear. This is crucial and requires just the right amount of acceleration in the first stint. Now you've got to hold this position while saving stamina for the home stretch by subtly altering the speed up and down. Finally, it's time to fly down the home stretch, accomplished by rhythmic d-pad manipulation and cruel horse whipping. More often than not, I found myself totally absorbed in this moment, rocking back and forth like an idiot while my heart raced as the finish neared. I don't know if other horse sims have offered this kind of immediate thrill separate from the depth of the breeding and other simulation aspects, but I certainly liked it about this one. And I also liked that there was an element of chance thrown in. You can run the perfect race and still lose, making the outcome far from predictable.

So has Gallop Racer 2003 turned me into a horse-rearing maniac? Not quite, but I had a pretty good time figuring this out.



The start is a crucial aspect of the race and requires quite good reflexes to get right, especially if your horse has a bad temper



In the stable, you can get into all aspects of horsies

"What I actually enjoyed most about the game, however, was the racing itself. It's not a simple horse-whipping affair."

Gallop Racer 2003: A New Breed

system: playstation 2 / developer: tecmo / publisher: tecmo / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

Wakeboarding Unleashed Feat. Shaun Murray

words tom ham

Now before you start rolling your eyes at another extreme sports game, hear me out. Amidst all the surfing, BMX, skateboarding and snowboarding games out there, the one sport that has been missing has been wakeboarding. Wake what? My reaction exactly. Wakeboarding is best described as a combination of surfing and water skiing. Basically you strap yourself to a small board (about the width of a surfboard but short like a skateboard) and then you're pulled by a powerful boat via a rope (similar to water skiing). Unlike surfing where you're riding the waves created by Mother Nature, in wakeboarding, you're riding the waves created by the boat in front of you. Coming from the house that Tony Hawk built is Wakeboarding Unleashed featuring Shaun Murray. Who is Shaun Murray? Apparently he's a super-duper wakeboarder in this...ahem...sport called wakeboarding. After checking out a preview build of the game, it really surprised me how much fun it could be. Similar to the Tony Hawk game (no surprise there), players are given a bunch of objectives to complete over the game's nine levels. Objectives range from

reaching a set score to performing specific tricks and combos. In addition to doing tricks off the waves, you can grind off man-made objects such as bleachers, ramps and railings. What makes Wakeboarding Unleashed incredibly challenging is that you always have to be aware of your environment and, more specifically, if your rope is going to get caught on something. So if you're executing a grind on top of a building and you can't see your boat in the distance, you'll lose your rope and your run is over. Visually, Wakeboarding Unleashed is rather eye-pleasing. The water physics are incredibly realistic and at times I got a little seasick. The various particle effects from the waves were also quite impressive. But the best part of the game was the cooperative multiplayer. Here one person controls the boat while the other controls the rider. As the rider is executing tricks and grinds, the driver has to find the fastest open path so the rider can still hold on to the rope and complete his combo. Bottom line—a lot of fun.

Wakeboarding Unleashed Featuring Shaun Murray

developer: shaba studios
publisher: activision
available: june 2003

preview



Inside Pitch 2003

words tom ham

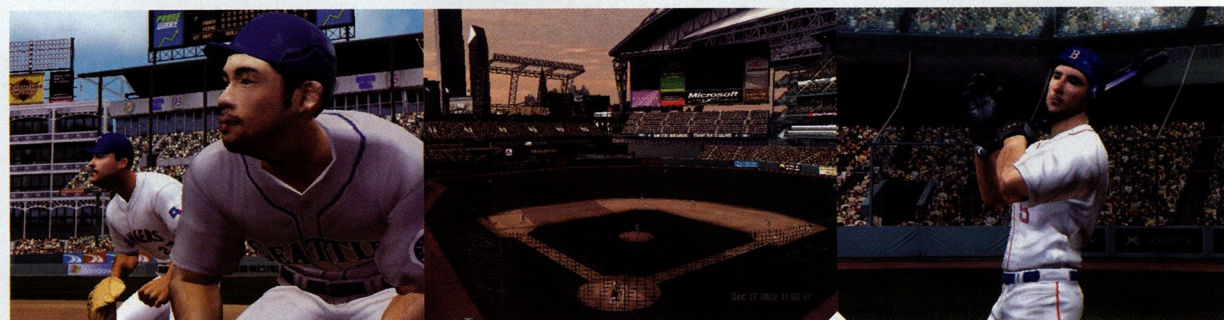
Just when we finish taking a look at all the baseball games for the year, a straggler appears that vies for our attention. Last year, Sega Sports was last out of the gate with their WSB 2K2 and this year it's Microsoft's turn. Absent from the Xbox until now, Inside Pitch 2003 is Microsoft's inaugural baseball title. As expected, Microsoft is pulling out all the stops with Inside Pitch and from the looks of things is poised to make an excellent first impression. Gameplay modes include Single Game, Season, Playoff, Training, Championship Challenges and a Home Run Derby. There is also a pretty comprehensive Create-A-Player mode as well. You can customize their look, gear, attributes and even batting stances. One of my favorite features is the Training Tracks mode. Here the game gives you close to 30 different training drills covering all areas of

baseball—fielding, batting and pitching. You can even take your created player through training and, if he performs well, skill points will be awarded and applied to his attributes. Another cool feature of Inside Pitch 2003 is the ability to customize the stadium music. Players will be able to rip their own music and use that music to fill the stadium. Not only will you be able to control which songs will be heard, but also when they start and end. Very slick. But the most compelling feature of Inside Pitch 2003 is the online play on Xbox Live. Microsoft is creating what it calls “the most comprehensive online baseball arena ever created.” Eh...I'll believe it when I see it up and running. Microsoft is promising real-time voice communication, online tracking of your win/loss record, batting and pitching records and many other options. Hopefully Microsoft can pull it off.

Inside Pitch 2003

developer: microsoft
publisher: microsoft
available: may 2003

preview



Are games too easy?

The burning question is finally put to the test in part 1 of our look at the evolution of video-game development

3D noah brewer

Based on countless inquiries, as well as our own opinion and subsequent curiosity on the subject—a product of the evolution of video games over the last five or so years—we asked a handful of respected developers the following question, incorporating as many of your concerns as possible along with a few of our own: Are games too easy? Is that even a valid question in today's market?

Certain games (like, say, *Devil May Cry 2*

or *Primal*) derive pleasure from being cinematic or epic—transporting players into their world—while games like *Panzer Dragoon Orta* or *Ikaruga*, for example, which seem to be dwindling in numbers, rely more on dexterity. *GunValkyrie* was seemingly the perfect 3D game for the hardcore set, but much of the press balked at its difficulty and it way underperformed. If the hardcore gamer can no longer adequately support a game, where do we go from here? Was *GunValkyrie*

before its time, with too few Xbox users at the time to support it, or have the enthusiast masses just dwindled that much?

Sixteen-bit games relied on difficulty (among other things, of course) because there wasn't much meat on the bones otherwise, given cartridge constraints, so they had to be hard to last. They were also geared towards a gamer weaned on 8-bit and arcade toughness. So then perhaps not enough consumers have made the trip from

that era to the current one to tip the design scales in their favor. And if so, are old-school gamers' fears justified, that developers are trying to make their games more accessible to casual users, thus erasing years of practice, and the notion of gaming being reserved for the savvy enthusiast? Are games becoming interactive movies? And if that's the case, don't they run the risk of becoming passé?

Here's what they had to say...

Denis Dyack

President
Silicon Knights



Notable Titles
Legacy of Kain, Eternal Darkness

I think many things are different now than in the days of the 16-bit era that may make it seem that way. However, it is not clear to us if games are easier or if gamers have become better. It is our belief that gamers have become much more sophisticated. This sophistication demands more complex games by the designers and this has lead to many side effects:

1. Gamers have become much better at playing games. When video games were first introduced to the masses, very few gamers were experts or hardcore gamers. However, as games became more and more a part of our everyday lives, the percentage of hardcore gamers increased. Furthermore, even the casual gamers have become learned in the ways of classic setups that designers commonly use. They now will quickly solve puzzles where they would not have before, making some games appear easier. Unfortunately, it is difficult to conceive new and original setups by game designers and often many of the same ideas are used from game to game. So whether the players realize it or not, they are often solving many of the same puzzles or doing the same combinations of moves from game to game. Thus, where the player was once challenged, now they may not be.

2. Making games is more difficult now than in the 16-bit era. The increasing sophistication of games has also made it difficult to concentrate purely on gameplay and difficulty. There are other areas like graphics, sound, technology and content that have not allowed game makers to spend as much time on gameplay and difficulty. Thus, when you did not have to worry about these other things you could spend more time on balancing difficulty. With the added sophistication in game design, you do not always get as much time as you would like.

3. Increasing budgets are having an effect. As the budgets of games have increased because increasing sophistication, games now have to sell more copies

to become profitable. So in most cases today, games are designed to be played by as many people as possible. This targets the causal gamers whose skill level is generally below that of the hardcore gamers. Catering to the mass market may skew the game balancing towards a lower difficulty level.

The philosophy that we had when designing *Eternal Darkness* was to try to remove any areas where the player would get stuck and frustrated. We wanted the different levels to flow together. So if we're given a choice between easier or harder we would probably lean toward easier so that some gamers would not get stuck in a difficult part. We also understand that making it too easy will frustrate the expert gamers. So we always look for a good balance. This is a difficult thing to achieve and something we spent a great deal of development time on.

Bill Baldwin

Project Director and Lead Developer
Digital Anvil



Notable Titles
Brute Force

Variable level of difficulty is a good way to appeal to a broader audience of more casual gamers while maintaining the challenge for the hardcore people. Playing on the lowest difficulty level lets the casual gamers get through the game to experience the story, cinematics, enemies and environments, with a level of challenge that wouldn't faze a hardcore gamer. Conversely, the highest difficulty level should have the casual gamer crying in frustration, while really testing the skills of the old-school players. We always reward the players who go above and beyond—killing every enemy, achieving all objectives, finding all the loot and power-ups, and doing so on the highest difficulty—by unlocking cool content or features, higher scores, or whatever. Not only does this reward the more skillful players, but it increases replay value as well.

Cliff Bleszinski

Lead Level Designer and Executive Producer
Epic Games



Notable Titles
Unreal, Unreal II

Everyone is struggling with this issue right now. The best solution would, of course, be a title that auto-adjusts to your skill level so you're always feeling challenged but not frustrated. A set-up like that would ensure that everyone who plays the game has a similarly challenging experience. It would also be very difficult to implement and test; ideally you'd want to avoid any exploits. An old game on the NES called *Zanac* did this and my friends and I used to avoid shooting foes on purpose because we knew that it would send more and more at us if we did.

And no, games are not becoming interactive movies. That's an oxymoron.

Raymond Holmes

Producer
Terminal Reality



Notable Titles
4x4 Evolution, Bloodrayne

You might as well ask...are games any fun? The answer is...it depends. The ease or fun of a game is in the eye of the beholder. I personally didn't like *Splinter Cell*, and many people I've talked to didn't like it either, yet it garnered 95% ratings primarily because of its gameplay. However, the gameplay was fairly hard and required repeated play of the same level, sometimes a dozen times, to progress. Is that fun? I don't think it is but some people do. If your players don't make it all the way

through your game, is that a success of your ability to make a hard game or is that your failure as a game designer? It's easy to make a hard game; it's much harder to make a game that will keep people occupied and happy for 20 hours.

Computer games are no longer a hobbyist market; it is no longer a time of plastic Ziplocs filled with a floppy and a photocopied instruction sheet. Teams have grown from a guy in a garage to 30-50 people. The costs involved are dramatically different. The hardcore market cannot sustain the current industry; the only way to keep the industry growing is to attract new consumers and they will not necessarily be hardcore. Does this mean games will become cakewalks? I don't think so. If you play a game and you never have to replay a level to get through the game, but you have a really great time playing it, is that too easy? If two games have 20 hours of solid, fun gameplay, but one can be won the first time through and the other requires 20 additional hours of replaying the same levels to progress, which is really more fun? It's through its difficulty level that a game can appeal to both the hardcore and the mass market. We just need to make our "normal" appeal to the mass market, and let those who like punishment turn the difficulty way up.

Alex Rigopolua

CEO
Harmonix Music Systems



Notable Titles
Amplitude, Frequency

I don't believe that a game developer has to choose between making a game "too easy for core gamers" or "too hard for casual gamers." Developers have a number of design options at their disposal to create games that are appropriately challenging for players with drastically varying skill levels.

For example, in the case of Harmonix's new game, *Amplitude*, the player can choose to play the game on one

of four difficulty levels: Mellow, Normal, Brutal, and Insane. Mellow is really, really mellow. We wanted to make the barrier to entry so low that even the most casual of casual gamers could get inside the game experience and immediately start having fun. (I knew we'd succeeded when I watched my five-year-old son beat the first five game levels...) At the opposite end of the spectrum, Insane is really, really insane. Even the most hardcore, seizure-seeking twitch addicts will be begging for mercy by the time they work their way up to the advanced stages. We invested considerable effort into making the gameplay accommodate the full spectrum of player skill levels, which I claim is a worthwhile investment for just about any game in today's market.

Dave Siller

Creative Director

Midway San Diego Studio



Notable Titles

Maximo: Ghosts to Glory (then at Capcom)

Well these are very different video gaming times and quite different video game players than just ten years ago! Today, games are all about "art" rather than gameplay, all about "reality" rather than surrealism and all about "recognition factor" rather than innovation.

Today's players are also all about "ease of play" rather than skill and strategy!

Strategy guides, cheat devices, cheat codes, self-help video tapes and even "option mode" choices of skill level are all contributors to this current state of affairs. Players will race through a game on the easiest setting and then on to the next one! Once they have seen it all, they care less about truly mastering the game as skilled players. They even will complain when a game does not conform to their desires to race through them! If a game requires skill, strategy or even just a learning curve, then it gets slammed and damned! So in that respect, it doesn't matter.

Please let me add that there is also a difference between easy, difficult and hard! Difficult is where a game has been cleverly designed to offer skillful challenge, or the ability to actually learn the attributes of a game and then use those attributes to continuously learn and evolve the game playing experience! Hard can be where a game is artificially difficult due to the notion that if it is not, then it is a one-time rental.

Having real gameplay techniques that can be altered by parameters to serve as difficulty adjustments is more preferable than impossible orchestrations that offer frustrations in the name of difficulty. Plainly said, good gameplay design that can be adjusted to make it more chal-

lenging is better than bad or cruel design that makes for hard or impossible experiences. Enough bad game design can alter player's perceptions and subsequently demand easier games to play.

Are today's games too easy? "Yes" for some that want it easy and "No" for others that use devices!

Dave Perry

President

Shiny Entertainment



Notable Titles

Earthworm Jim, MDK, Sacrifice, Messiah, Matrix

I am an old-school gamer and by playing over the last 20 years, you'd think by now, after all that practice, I would be a totally kick-ass gamer. On our last game, Sacrifice, I thought I would go out on the Internet and kick people's butts, because after all, I knew how the game worked internally! Yet I got my ass handed to me by some of the guys out there! I could not believe that some gamers can do so many things at once, whilst running backwards, whilst planning their next moves. Then you realize it's practically impossible to make a modern game that these hardcore guys will feel challenged by, and at the same time some guy that just bought his first machine will not get stomped on by.

Therefore I am still a supporter of the "old" way of doing it. Meaning that I can adjust the challenge level of the game myself. I guess the only thing I wish game developers would do more is to reward people in some way for managing to make it through the more difficult settings. If some god-like player brings the game to its knees on its most difficult setting, then the game should bow down to him, rewarding his special status. I don't see enough of that and now that I have said this, I suppose I had better make sure I do that in our next game. :)

Ken Lobb

Studio X Manager

Microsoft Game Studios



Notable Titles

Goldeneye, Perfect Dark

Are games getting too easy? This is a difficult question to answer on the philosophical all-encompassing, all-games-ever level, so I will personalize my answer. I like the games I play to be easier than I used to. I used to enjoy games that basically kicked my ass over and over until I felt like denting the wall with the controller. However, at the time, virtually all games were balanced that way. It was almost like I had to play games that were too damn hard or not play at all! I would pride myself on beating every game I bought, too damn hard or not. OK, I gave up on Athena!

Now, there are a lot of games that are not necessarily too easy, but are balanced. I don't have to break controllers to have fun. I feel that this is a good thing for the industry as a whole, and better for my blood pressure at the same time. I play to have fun.

There is another side though. If I think back over the past several years to the games I remember having the most fun with, what pops into my mind? Halo on Legendary; Splinter Cell where I died hundreds of times and loved it; Panzer; Ikaruga; Devil May Cry (1); Double 0 Agent (I balanced this one to abuse the players :)). Several of these are not only the best games over the last several years, they are also the hardest... The best designers can set up balance that's really hard, yet never cheap (cheap was more typical than "hard" in most cases in the past). Difficult yet super-rewarding should be the goal. Sometimes, it's through perfection in balance, other times through multiple difficulty levels (as in Goldeneye/Perfect Dark and Halo).

Bottom line, I like great games, they should never be too easy. Really hard is fine as long as it doesn't mean really cheap!

Satoshi Kanematsu

Executive Producer

Tecmo



Notable Titles

Rygar, Monster Rancher 4, Gallop Racer 2003

It has now been almost 50 years since electronic games were first brought into this world. During the early "primordial" period, everything seemed fresh and exciting. Additionally, at that time, games relying heavily on reflexes were the most common because of hardware limitations. It was only natural, then, that developers focused on game difficulty. However, with the increase in hardware specifications and the maturation of the "gaming generation," the content of games has become much more diversified. We have gone from an age when any game was original to one in which elements such as graphics, sound and

story, fueled by demand from gamers, have broadened the horizons of gaming and transformed it into a new entertainment medium.

I believe that the most important aspect of a game lies in the game's engine, the skeleton that supports the muscle that is story, graphics and sound. The integral thing here is balance. A balanced game engine is one in which the player can jump in and start playing right away, but contains enough depth to allow the player that has become accustomed to the intricacies of the system to play harder and more intensely. The most interesting and most satisfying games contain something innovative in the game engine supporting the graphics and sound, and achieve a difficulty level that is not so difficult as to cause the player to throw the controller in frustration, but not so easy that the game can be finished in one sitting. Determining the optimum difficulty level is one of the most trying, but at the same time one of the most important, processes in game development.

Ted Price

President

Insomniac Games



Notable Titles

Spyro the Dragon, Ratchet & Clank

Are games becoming too easy in general? Absolutely not. There are still plenty of games on the market now that can induce fits of controller-throwing fury because they're so damn hard. And unfortunately, in a lot of cases the difficulty arises from bad controls, bad camera and inconsistent enemy AI.

On the other hand, I think that there are many more well-balanced games out these days than there used to be. This doesn't mean that the games are necessarily "easy." With a growing market that is more and more comprised of newcomers versus hardcore gamers, it's become a necessity to make games with difficulty curves that aren't too steep for the average gamer. This is especially true in the console world. The best examples of these games may seem easy at first but they eventually offer plenty of hardcore challenges once they've got the gamer hooked. This reflects a real evolution in design approach over the last couple of generations and has helped drive the growth of games in the more mainstream markets.

I think that the enthusiast press and a vocal minority of hardcore gamers erroneously drive the idea that games these days are "too easy." In many cases, these guys aren't the target audience for console developers but because they speak loudly, it's hard not to be swayed

by their opinions. For us, since we make games with a pretty broad target audience, we have to remember that the majority of console gamers aren't hardcore players. If we alienate that majority by making games that are insanely difficult, we'll go out of business.

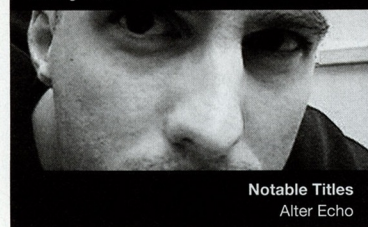
At the same time, it really is possible to make games that satisfy hardcore gamers and that are accessible to the casual user at the same time. Dynamic difficulty tuning, training levels and focus tests are all tools that we use to ensure that we can provide plenty of hardcore challenges in the game without losing casual players at first. I'd argue that some of the more popular games right now exhibit those qualities—GTA Vice City, Metroid, Ratchet & Clank, Sly Cooper, Splinter Cell to name a few.

Yes, we're trying to accommodate the casual gamers but it doesn't mean that the games are less enjoyable than the old-school faves. What we don't do is artificially extend gameplay time by forcing players to die over and over (like some of the old-school faves).

Ultimately, the biggest challenge we face with every game is to make it fun and accessible to an increasingly diverse audience.

Andy Crosby

Lead Designer
Outrage Games



Notable Titles
Alter Echo

The constant move for higher production values has led to increasing budgets, which also means a need for increased sales. Very few difficult games become mega-hits. So that's a simple reason for why games are getting easier. The question is, is that a problem for the industry, a problem for gamers, or does it matter? I don't think it matters, because "games" is a very broad distinction.

With epic-scaled, sprawling story-based games, particularly ones that take dozens of hours to complete, having extra difficulty is undermining what the game is about, which is presenting a story and creating an experience where the player feels like they are a part of that world. Since these games tend to appeal more to the mass market, it's sensible for them to get easier. I don't think many hardcore gamers mind so much that a game is easy if they feel like they are getting their money's worth from the other aspects of the game's experience. But few casual gamers will even try to finish a game that they are frustrated by, and they won't see a lot of content that they paid for.

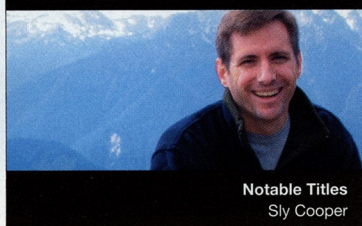
You still can find many genres where

difficulty is a part of the game, however, and I don't think titles in those areas are getting any easier to play. Fighting games and sports titles in particular are designed around competition, and proving who can master the controls, proving who is the best. Making it difficult to play is the whole point, and in that case isn't shortchanging the player on immersion or narrative, since those genres rarely include a story at all.

Just as movies have branched out into many different styles and types of films, developers will continue to need to look at what is really important about the game they are making and who they are making it for, and balance difficulty accordingly. The existence of different genres means that everyone can be happy if it's done right. For every *Big Fat Greek Wedding* there is also an *Aliens* out there! The former worked just fine without having any spaceships and the latter didn't need a wedding to be cool. Hardcore gamers can understand that not all of the titles out there are geared toward their elite skill set—and they can still find titles that are. In fact, as the market continues to expand, they'll get more titles when mass-market titles are profitable, because more studios will have the ability to experiment with games that appeal to limited audiences.

Brian Fleming

Co-founder and Producer
Sucker Punch



Notable Titles
Sly Cooper

First, I think it's a bit of howling at the moon. Yes it's true, games are different today than before—they're better now. Way better. They are better in absolutely every way. Most importantly, there's a much larger diversity of gaming experiences available today.

From the so-called "old-school" or "hardcore" gamer point of view...this group used to represent the majority of the market, so games targeted at them were the best sellers. Now the hardcore players represent a smaller slice of a much bigger pie. There are still games targeted at the hardcore market, it's just that there are also very successful games not targeted at the hardcore market. Gaming is absolutely *not* reserved for the savvy enthusiast—if anything has changed, it's that. The question posed insinuates that hardcore gamer ranks are dwindling, but I don't see that—though I do see their relative share of the market decreasing.

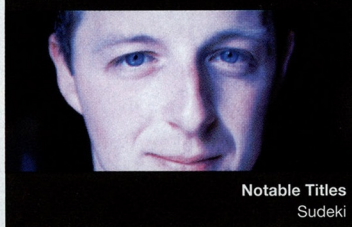
Remember that game designers have to pay attention to what is

satisfying about the experience they are designing. For hardcore players, I think a significant part of the satisfaction of gaming is doing things that other people can't do—it's a badge of honor. It is entirely true that for a game like Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus, we didn't design much of the experience—besides the Master Thief Sprints—to be satisfying from this badge-of-honor point of view. We designed it to be satisfying for a person who wants to feel like a thief, to see new things, to follow the story, to enjoy the experience. Our game is an amusement park, not a mountain climb.

I started and I will end by saying games are better in all ways than before. If all you want is a DIFFICULT game, then go play an online RTS or FPS against the best players in the world—now *that* is a mountain climb.

Matt Wilkinson

Technical Director
Climax



Notable Titles
Sudeki

It depends who you ask; if you ask my mum, then she would say that all games are too hard. If you ask one of our testers, then they can finish most games quicker than the majority of people and would complain that some are too easy. The audience of gamers has widened drastically in the last few years, and with this has come a wider skill set and also a much broader range of gamer personalities. Back in the 8- and 16-bit days, people who bought games were generally youngish people (9-15) who spent their pocket money on a title because they were avid gamers. A lot of thought used to go into which game to buy, because pocket money was not to be wasted, and when you got that game home you would generally play it to death and you would persevere and learn to beat it—it had to be hard to keep you playing it and give you value for money. These were the hardcore gamers, and they made up a large percentage of the game-buying market.

Now that owning a console is considered "cool" by people up to 30 and over, far more games are bought on a whim because there is more disposable income to spend. If you buy a game and you can't get past the title screen, then you'll tell your mates it's crap and it will sit on the shelf for the rest of its life. The older people get, the less they like to be beaten and the more they want to feel supreme at what they are doing. Take Formula One games, for example; on most of them, you can turn all of the help off and you're left to try and cope with 800 bhp in your rear wheels, no racing

line to tell you how to take the corners, no braking assistance, no steering help, nothing. Just man and machine (well, sort of), but how many people over the age of 18 do you know who would ever dream of playing it like that? Not many, I'll bet. I wouldn't—I want to feel like I'm a brilliant racing driver for 20 minutes before going back to my real life, and yet when I was much younger, turning off the help was the first thing I'd do. Indianapolis 500 on the Amiga let you do this and I persevered and persevered until I was incredibly good at racing with all of the help disabled. I'd even spend ages testing new settings on my car and doing hours of practice laps, whereas now I simply don't have the time any more, but at least I can choose how I want to play it.

Formula One games are an extreme example, though, because the cars have so many settings and the game can assist you in so many ways. Other types of games use difficulty settings to appeal to a wider range of people, and this is a good thing—I love Time Crisis 2, but I would never dream of playing it on the really hard setting because I don't have time to get good enough at it for it not to annoy me. I want to be able to pick it up, feel that I am progressing nicely through the game because I'm so skillful, save my progress an hour later and go and do something else with the warm and fuzzy feeling that I've been playing well for the last hour. If I kept getting a bullet between the eyes after walking 30 meters into the level, then the game wouldn't last five minutes without being chucked out of the window.

There are so many different people buying games nowadays that one difficulty level, one game even, is not going to be able to satisfy everyone. I thought Ratchet & Clank was an amazing game and I loved playing it. The difficulty was just right to make me keep on going back to it and wanting to progress until I finally finished it, and yet some people moaned that it was too easy. Conversely, games that they think are just right, I would probably find frustratingly difficult. The hardcore gamer no longer makes up the majority of the game-buying public, and the games on the shelves reflect this in their overall difficulty. There will always be games to cater to the hardcore gamers, because you have to remember that there are a fair few of the hardcore who do the actual development, but most games will be aimed squarely at the mass market because, and I don't want to sound cynical about this, that is where the money is.

Greg Thomas

President

Visual Concepts



Notable Titles
The 2K Series, Floigan Bros.

From an entertainment perspective, today's gamers have so many choices in what to play. If they are not able to achieve success in a relatively quick period of time, their interest in that game diminishes and they move on.

Games today are much deeper and cinematic than games from previous console generations. Gamers expect to be able to finish a game and do very well—perhaps not so much based on skill as it had been in the past, but more on editing the game they are playing to suit their own needs with cheat codes and whatnot. Games built to be very challenging are long over. Perhaps there is still a small pocket of consumers (old school) that like these kinds of games but, for the most part, gamers are looking for quick success. Developers need to understand that as the industry grows, games become more and more mass market and therefore need to be more approachable for more people. For sports gamers, some of this remains true, however the game must also scale to the skill level of the gamer—perhaps easier to get into but challenging to master.

comment

Dave Halverson



I set out to do this feature based on emails and letters from readers, many of which cite modern games as too easy, sparked by my review of Devil May Cry 2, a game I love for its art, atmosphere, freedom, production values, soundtrack, characters, and on and on. I rarely died in the game, but after 15 years playing games nearly every day, I rarely die in any game where you can amass power. Watching a rookie play DMC2, they appear clumsy and confused, and die often, while I make Lucia look good. I think Capcom was wise to have balanced the game right in the middle, adding depth over difficulty, and a difficulty select for good measure. Plus, if I want rock-hard, I still have Devil May Cry. I don't play games like Devil May Cry 2 to be insanely challenged these days, but more to take in their awesome atmosphere and be entertained. Lately, I don't use my expertise so much to beat games as much as I do to look good doing so. A good game is like a dance; string together a sequence of perilous jumps with hovers and enemy fire coming in and I'll nail it the first (okay, maybe second) time. A rookie might flub through it, or have to do it over a few more times, but the important thing is that it's do-able for both of us. I think games like Primal and Matrix (as well as DMC2) really drive this point home. It's not so much about beating them as it is how you do it and, most importantly, how fun and/or fulfilling the journey is. I think expert gamers take their dexterity for granted sometimes too. You may think a game is too easy, but if you ever go to a trade show and look over regular people's shoulders...it's a rude awakening, my friends.

When I play games like Primal, DMC2, Ratchet & Clank, Star

Fox Adventures, Wind Waker (and on and on), I don't run through them, but rather (if the character has the animation) walk much of the time, soaking in the environment and details on objects, zooming up on models (dead and alive), looking for seams, or working on stylishly disposing of enemies without taking a single hit. Less adept players will get through these games, but they may not look as good doing it nor derive as much pleasure doing so, at least not until they begin to really understand games, which they'll never do if they can't play them. These days, game developers are building us more than mere dexterity challenges, they're creating worlds, and at the same time conforming to an evolving and much broader market. We need to keep this in mind.

That said, the games I really get up for, like GunValkyrie and Jet Set Radio Future—games that do challenge me, perhaps even introduce controller to wall—I desperately want to see keep getting made. These games are shut off to rookie gamers though, so this is where the old-school and hardcore gamers of the world need to unite. These games don't have to sell in the hundreds of thousands to survive, but when they do under, say, 100,000, we enter the danger zone. This is what scares me. As avid a 16-bit junkie I was (and still am), I have to admit, I love modern game design. I don't want walk-throughs, but I don't feel like a game has to beat me up to be fun either. Hard is good, fun is good, frustration is bad. Thrill us, move us, make us laugh, but don't sell us short.

My thanks to all of the developers and PR people who helped put this together. Hopefully, we can do it again soon, because we have a lot more questions... Now it's your turn: write us!

play anime



Inhuman nature

PATLABOR WXIII

words dave halverson

Directed by Fumihiko Takayama (*Macross TV*) with art direction by Hiromasa Ogura (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Wings of Honeamise*), music by Kenji Kawai (*Patlabor* Movies 1&2, *Ghost in Shell*) and animation by Madhouse (*X*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Vampire Hunter D Bloodlust*), *WXIII*'s pedigree is one of anime royalty...but this isn't their usual beat.

As police detectives Kusumi and Hata—two very different people—investigate gruesome serial Labor (modern-day labor robots with human pilots) attacks around the Tokyo Bay area, we are slowly lulled into an action/drama landscape that expounds the best of both worlds: it's Hitchcockian in its mystery and Kubrickian in its drama. If ever an anime shed any stigma from being animated, this is it. This is just a great film, plain and simple.

The shape-shifter of entertainment mediums, anime covers the spectrum from the absurd to the dramatic, bringing to both an exaggerated world reserved for those lucky enough to have discovered it. As each producer's vision is brought to life in exacting form, bound only by budget, time and ability, we are given a key to explore behind a door in our minds that's rarely opened. Somehow, *WXIII* manages to achieve this by holding a mirror up to the everyday, rather than the absurd, proving that even in a world mired in CG there are still certain things that can only be achieved through meticulous handcrafting. One need only look as far as Hayao Miyazaki's works to realize this.

What I love about *WXIII* is its ability to make reality so amazingly compelling. I was

as captivated by the subtle moments and cinematography in this film as I might be watching *Eyes Wide Shut* or *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. When animators can establish a mood so meditative, through detail, color and sound, that a single in-car shot driving across a bay bridge can take me away, that is powerful animation.

The other side of *WXIII* is a brilliantly orchestrated monster movie. Not a clumsy sensational scare-a-thon governed by violence and shock value, but one steeped in personal tragedy, sci-fi themes, and intrigue that slowly feeds us from the first frame to the compelling last.

This is a film to be treasured, presented on a three-disc Special Edition DVD that will take you inside its vision and creation. Whether you're an anime fan or not, I can't recommend it highly enough.

"If ever an anime shed any stigma from being animated, this is it. This is just a great film, plain and simple."



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WXIII is a welcome departure in the Patlabor lineage, placing the emphasis on suspense and drama over mecha.



Patlabor WXIII

studio: pioneer animation / rating: r / running time: 105 minutes

play rating ●●●●●



Hocus meets pocus

Rune Soldiers

words dave halverson

In the spirit of *Slayers*, *Sorcerer on the Rocks* and *Sorcerer Hunters*, *Rune Soldiers* is a team-based action/adventure/comedy set in ancient times, bringing with it an excellent script and beautiful detail, in a production that's polished in every respect. It's also a break from the norm in a most timely manner. This time around the females are the dominant sex and men, their fodder for abuse. Let the gender bending begin.

Priestess Melissa, Merrill the thief and Genie, an all around warrior and sword fighter, are missing one key element in their merry (but sadly in-debt) band: a magician...someone to open those pesky seals that seem to be protecting all of the good treasure. Unfortunately for them, most of the female magicians at the local guild are either shut-ins or just plain not interested. The one magician who is, Louie, happens to be a bumbling playboy that can't keep his head in the books, but beggars can't be

choosers, so even though they loathe his very existence, he gets the job, at least until they can make enough money for someone with girl power. Before that can happen, though, things take a turn for the worse. During Melissa's Ritual of Revealing—a holy ceremony in which she will become bound with her valiant champion—guess who drops in? Louie, of course, seeking refuge from the beating Genie and Merrill hope to put on him for sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. Now bound to him forever, for better or for worse (of course the latter ensues), the *Rune Soldiers* just got a little hairier. Combining quality animation, fine detail, Indy Jones wit, and enough patronizing banter for any two shows, *Rune Soldiers* may be the best of its ilk since *Slayers*.

"Combining quality animation, fine detail, Indy Jones wit, and enough patronizing banter for any two shows, *Rune Soldiers* may be the best of its ilk since *Slayers*."



Rune Soldiers vol.1

studio: adv films / rating: 15 & up / running time: 100 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

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Read or Die

words dave halverson

The single most underused tool in modern cinema (animated or otherwise) has to be the bookworm. The unlikeliest of heroes, after all, always make the best stories (as evidenced by Harry Potter and company), and *Read Or Die* takes this hypothesis to soaring new heights, mixing Bond style with Potter frumpiness and a major dose of science fiction. The end product, a gorgeous film that would make Disney blush, is without a doubt the most refreshing and highly stylized animated film to come along since *Wings of Honeamise*.

The White House has been single-handedly demolished by a demon wearing the backpack from hell—the library of congress pillaged and robbed of 600 books. Meanwhile, back in jolly old England, Yomiko Readman, a cutesy, frumpy (yet well-endowed) young woman, rolls out of bed from under a pile of books—her life's passion. After making her routine rounds buying books all over the city, she ducks into a dusty old basement archive accessed by a secret elevator where she discovers volume one of *The Immortal Beloved*. Narrowly grabbing it just before a mysterious cloaked woman, she makes for the street, so enthralled by its contents that she



"What happens next is one of the coolest plot twists I've ever seen as little Yomiko takes him down using only a red ribbon and paper! Now there's a super hero I can get behind."



doesn't even notice the city around her is under siege from a demonic man on a giant flying grasshopper, spreading thick clouds of swarming bees. Swooping down, he grabs the book and makes his getaway. What happens next is one of the coolest plot twists I've ever seen as little Yomiko takes him down using only a red ribbon and paper! Now there's a super hero I can get behind.

Yomiko, known as The Paper, works as an agent for The Special Operations Force of the British Libraries, and they've got a major crisis on their hands. Several genetic samples from the great persons in history exhibit (known as EGIN) have been stolen from the World Genome Archive and are being cloned with super powers akin to their notoriety through rare books. Sent to investigate in Washington by Mr. Joker (think M), Yomiko and her two comrades, Miss Deep, a stone-cold hotty with the ability to pass through solid matter, and Drake, a bad-ass merc with a knack for pottery, are about to embark on what can only be billed as god's gift to the secret agent/spy caper genre. If *Bond* had a cast and story half this compelling, they'd have to build more theatres.

On top of its amazing characters and intriguing story, *ROD* is a gorgeous film, wrought with fluid animation, incredible characters and architecture, rich color, and a gifted vocal cast. It certainly took me by surprise. And talk about irony: at one point the UN green-flags an attack, but when it begins to go awry, the American President dives for "the button," only to be tackled and restrained before wetting himself. Not that GB would ever soil his trousers but you know he's lookin' at that button funny these days.

With *Read or Die*, Manga has scored yet again. Another direct hit to display on the mantle beside *Ghost in the Shell*, *Wings of Honeamise*, *Blood*, *End of Evangelion*, and *Ninja Scroll*, *ROD*'s destined to become a classic and sell accordingly for years to come.

Miss Deep and The Paper
look good on paper.



Read Or Die

studio: manga entertainment / rating: 13 & up / running time: 90 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

DNA²

words dave halverson



Junta Momonari has a big—no, make that huge—problem. Where most shy anime boys pop a nosebleed when they see panties or a little breast action, Junta pukes profusely (I know—sexy), throwing a slight damper on any chance at a love life. Barring some sort of miracle, or finding a girl who doesn't mind rolling in regurgitated bento boxes, he's pretty much destined to die a virgin. Fortunately for us, he gets his miracle...in the form of hyper-cute and voluptuous DNA operator Karin Aoi, from 100 years in the future—a future decimated by overpopulation, thanks to Junta.

As the story goes, a guy called the Mega Playboy impregnated 100 women in his youth, who then all had male offspring who went on to impregnate 100 women...and so on, and so on. That someone is believed to be Junta, and Karin has been sent back to rub him out. (Do I smell a hint of *The Terminator*?) When she arrives to find this supposed chick magnet a puking loser, she's somewhat thrown for a loop, but she hits him with the DNA adjustment anyway, thus creating...the Mega Playboy! So you see where this is going.

To set the stage, the most popular girl in school (after using him like a dish rag) has come to love him, but he has the hots for Karin; meanwhile, the girl he's

destined to marry, Ami, hangs in the balance, confused, bewildered, and to some extent, pissed off. If Karin can get them together it'll be mission accomplished, if not, she doesn't dare go back to the future.

The wrinkle is that Junta, a loser by all standards, only becomes the Mega Playboy when he's pushed to the limits of pant-wetting sextitude, paving the way for all sorts of cheeky situation comedy. My only beef with him is the dork he becomes when he morphs into the Mega Playboy. Repulsive, condescending and with the rapport of a Vegas lounge act, he spouts cheesy dialogue like a retarded Hallmark card that would make any girl conjure some vomit of her own. The fact that Junta's classmates speak in Dick-and-Jane-ese doesn't really bother me so much, but MP needs a serious boot to the head. Otherwise I like what I see, and moreover where it seems to be headed, which spans 12 episodes plus three OVAs on five discs! Karin is perky and cool enough to carry the entire show, the kind of anime character you love to see plastered on everything from soda cans to your biceps.

Katsura's Video Girl Ai certainly left its mark on the US anime scene. With any luck, *DNA2* will turn out to be equally long-legged. So far so good.

"Where most shy anime boys pop a nosebleed when they see panties or a little breast action, Junta pukes profusely."

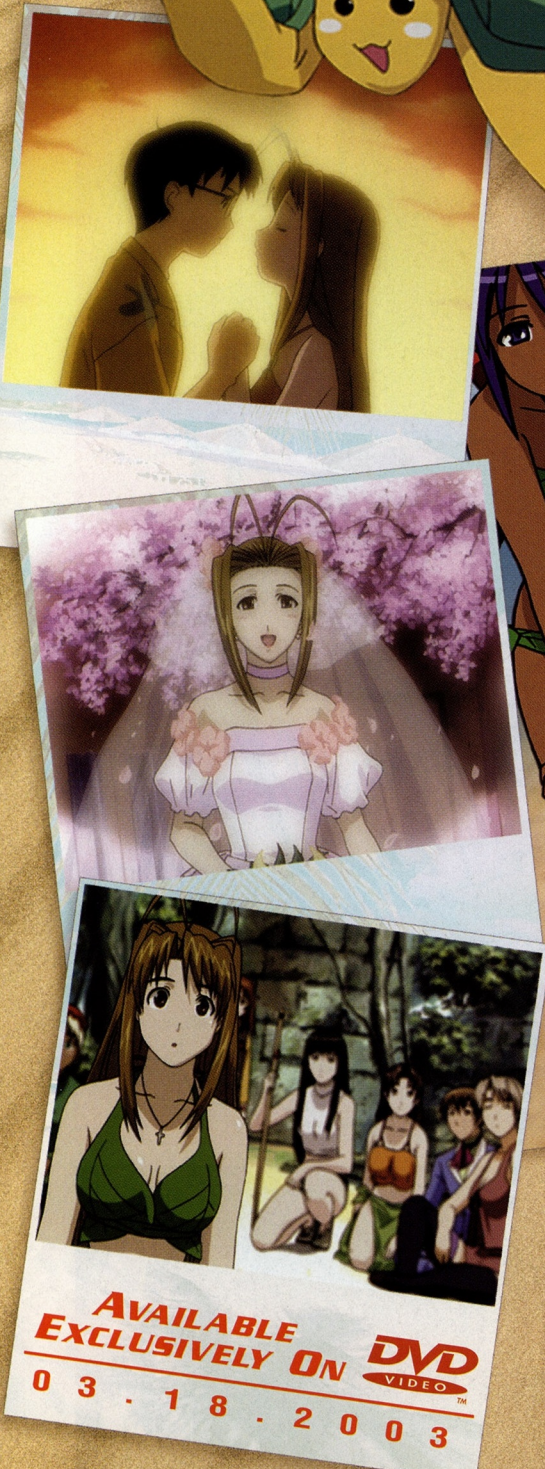
DNA² vol.1

studio: central park media / rating: 13 & up / running time: 75 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

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FLCL

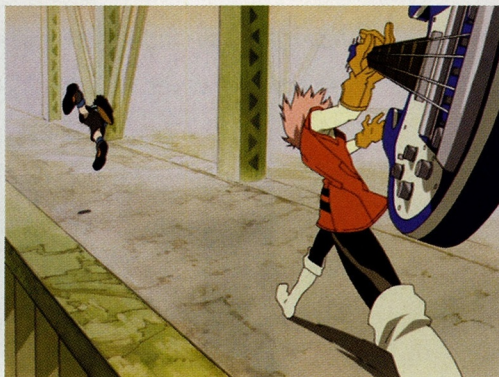
words dave halverson

F LCL isn't just digital animation at its finest and the coolest anime ever; it may just be the single coolest thing on the planet. I don't know how else to describe it. How can such a piece of high art even live and breathe in a world so uptight? Who thinks this freely anymore and why isn't he on a cereal box? Kazuya Tsurumaki, you have my attention! Gainax and Production I.G deserve a medal for this one—either that or matching straight jackets.

The theatre of the abnormal just keeps getting nuttier and nuttier as *FLCL* winds into its middle volume. Nandaba Naota, now settled in with the alien girl that's running his life (and household) and the robot (box head) that's grown out of his head, he has bigger fish to fry...much bigger. The class president, Eri Ninamori, who also happens to be the mayor's daughter, has rigged the school production of *Puss 'n' Boots* so Naoto has to play the cat, which is ironic, seeing as how the latest thing to grow out of his head are real cat ears. Dad's about town hand-distributing his mini-zine of justice, box head is eating curry (Little Prince curry for kids, that is) and dressing up (!), and something really strange is about to spurt out of Ninamori's head...these are the normal moments in episode three. By the end of episode four, the alien invasion has begun and Naota's relationship with his dad has taken an otherworldly turn that'll have you scraping your brain off the floor.

Intrigued? It makes no difference. I have *FLCL*, so who the hell cares? If you don't check this series out, your life can't possibly be complete. That's just the way it is.

"Intrigued? It makes no difference. I have *FLCL*, so who the hell cares? If you don't check this series out, your life can't possibly be complete."



FLCL vol.2

studio: **synch-point** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **60 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

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The Guyver

studio: manga entertainment / rating: 15 & up / running time: 180 minutes

One of the first anime I ever watched, more years ago than I care to remember, was *The Guyver*. America had fruity super heroes in tights; Japan had ass-ripping demon warriors with human hosts; my love for anime was born.

In case you're wondering from whence we came, apparently we were bred by an alien race (chosen for Earth's cozy atmosphere) as biological weapons capable of thought—like human smart bombs. Inside every human, the aliens bred a dormant Zoanoid—a monster form (conveniently indicative of mammal, reptile or amphibian) with the ability to erupt on cue whenever necessary and then later return to normal. Sort of like The Hulk, only uglier and without the memory lapse. Then they left. Eons later, the Chronos organization discover the aliens' journal and decide to pick up where they left off, cultivating Zoanoids, with the intention of creating a master race on Earth. Of course, only the Guyver stands in their way.

We join this lovely tale after the three mysterious units capable of creating the Guyvers are smuggled out of Chronos Japan when a test subject decides it's time to expose the truth. Of course, Chronos goons are close behind and itchin' to bite his friggin' head off. When the recon mission goes awry, the units are scattered, falling into the hands of Chronos Supervisor (and mega-maniacal nut job) Lisker, our protagonist

Sho Fukamachi and a third individual, which would be somewhat of a plot spoiler. Since only the Guyver stands between Chronos and their plan for world domination, and they can't kill it, Sho's best friend—witness to Sho's violent transformation—Tetsuro and his sister Agito (whom Sho loves) become pawns in a life-or-death struggle with far-reaching implications. Basically everyone tries to kill them and Sho plays defense while attempting to hide his dark secret from Agito.

Guyver is classic B-monster-movie material brought off as only the Japanese can. Think the cheekiness of *Godzilla* with 100 times the gore in an animated feature. I love it when in the heat of battle, monsters pause to call out what they're going to do next—that and thinking out-loud dialogue kills me. It's a shame the quality drops off so measurably between volumes (they possess almost entirely different production staffs), leaving V2 little value other than furthering the story, but this is a great piece of classic anime nevertheless. In the wake of so much polished digital- and CG-based animation, its return, newly re-mastered on two six-episode DVDs, is a welcome one indeed. *The Guyver* is an excellent throwback: cheesy super hero rhetoric mixed with bone-shredding, blood-spraying, hardcore violence.

DAVE HALVERSON



play rating ●●●●●

Space Pirate Mito Vol.2

studio: animeworks / rating: 13 & up / running time: 75 minutes

The second DVD in the *Space Pirate Mito* trilogy comes hurling our way with some much-needed backstory before catapulting us into the fray between the Galactic Patrol, Mito and her mutt of a son, Aoi. Just how did a 12,000-year-old, three-foot tall alien girl in an exosuit come to birth an Earth child? The question brings about a disturbing mental image (current knowledge in tow), although we unfortunately never get to see "the act." The blessed event, however, has brought the wrath of the Galactic Patrol crashing down on Earth, sanctioning two agents to bring Mito to justice: the Gunstar Heroes-like brother/sister team of Henga and Nenga Mutsuki. Unfortunately for Nenga, when he sends in Henga to charm Aoi and lure him in the old-fashioned way, through puberty, she falls for him, throwing a major-size monkey wrench into the sordid affair. In his angst, Nenga transforms just about anything he sees into a giant robot, including

a train, to commence pummeling anything even remotely close to Mito and her mutant crew, who look like rejects from Star Fox. Ultimately, his deception, and penchant for ruthless behavior, pays off, or so we are led to believe. I smell an Oscar.

While the overall integrity of the animation in *Courting Disaster* isn't quite on par with volume one's (par for the course for series anime pretty much across the board), it doesn't suffer much as a result. The show's unique look and hyper-exaggerated expression get the job done, and fluidity is still emphasized where needed. As sci-fi comedy goes, *Mito* is the sleeper hit of the season, and since it's only three DVDs deep you don't have to break the bank to slip into it.

DAVE HALVERSON



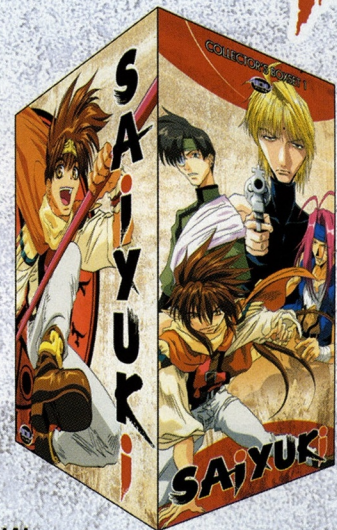
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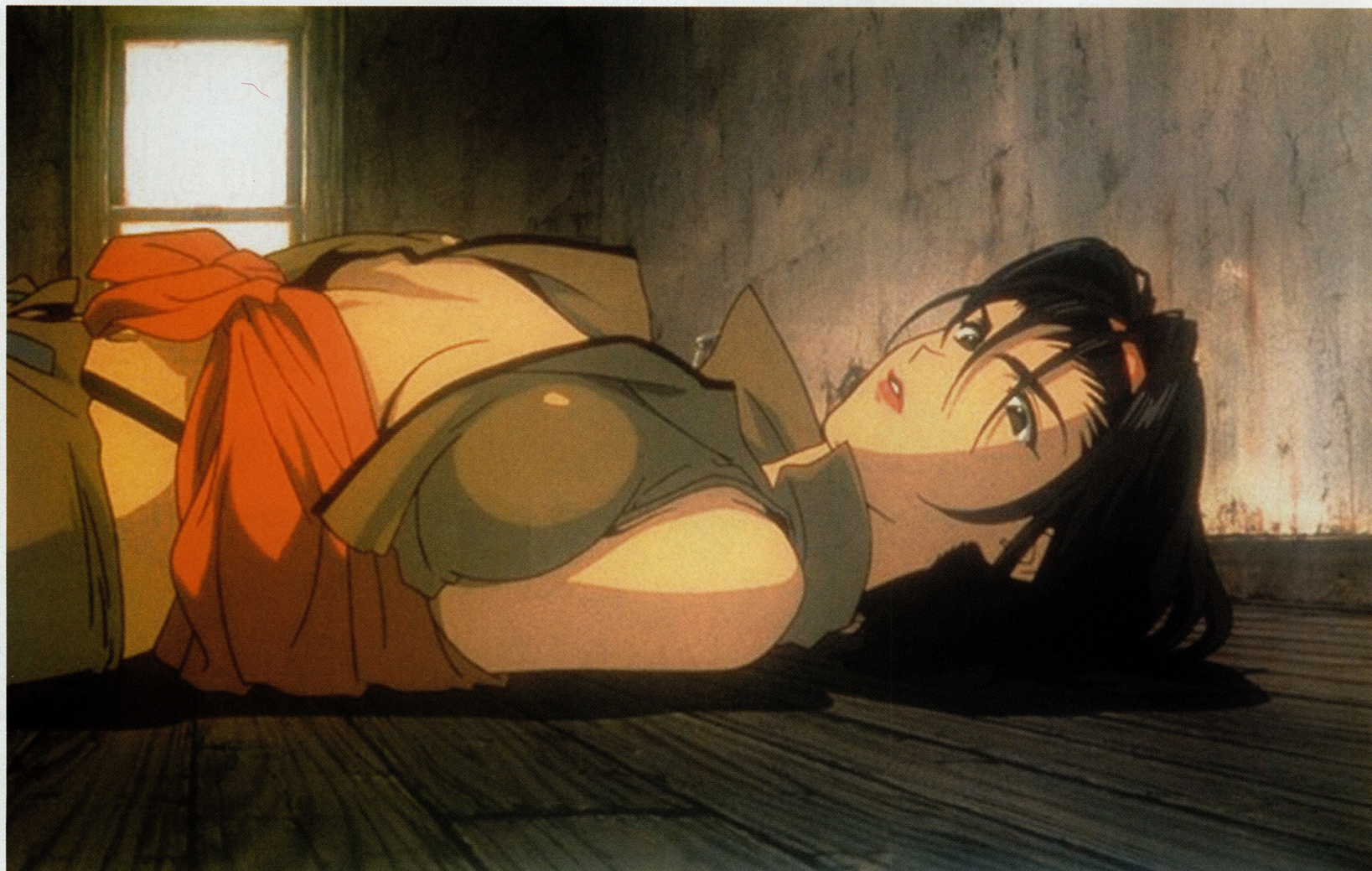


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Faye Valentine, Cowboy Bebop: The Movie

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Miyazaki magic

words brady fletcher

Spirited Away Disney/Buena Vista



Film critic Roger Ebert once spoke of the first time he met legendary anime director Hayao Miyazaki as if it were a moment of grand reverie. Listening to a venerated movie lover like Ebert—someone who has been in the company of great luminaries, of countless filmmakers and high-profile actors at the peak of their craft—expressing such a tremendous respect and admiration for Miyazaki and his work, seeing the look of wonder in his eyes as he described its potent magic, becomes a special, shared experience. Miyazaki is indeed a master, and I too have completely surrendered to the uplifting joy contained within his art.

In Japan, Miyazaki's films have been thriving for more than two decades. Disney animators often view the director's work as transcendent, aspiring to somehow tap the glory of its technique. When you watch a Miyazaki film, you are a part of something no other filmmaker seems capable of duplicating. He paints the ineffable, bringing a spirit and mood to the imagery that is dreamlike in its impact.

Miyazaki's latest masterpiece, *Spirited Away*, was released in Japan in 2001 and has since become the first film in history to make over \$200 million before coming to America; even *Titanic* couldn't capture this same level of success in Japan. In a proper world, Disney's inaugural DVD release of the film will find you and throngs of other movie lovers lucky enough to recognize what Japan already has. If for some reason you cling to the unfortunate fallacy that animated features are just for children, you will be missing one of the finest movies released this year.

Miyazaki has been known to draw and intimately supervise more than half the frames of animation in his films himself, which is an insane, touchingly admirable accomplishment. *Spirited Away* was the first project the aging director chose to scale back on, throwing more responsibility in the laps of his key artists, but the result takes nothing away from the personal, intimate

qualities his films so distinctly possess. This is one of the most beautiful of animated features, every single frame a painstaking labor of love. The animators allow their scenes to breathe, holding shots unusually long to simply allow the enchantment to unspool at a quiet, contemplative pace.

The movie is a story not unlike "Alice in Wonderland," where nothing is of the ordinary and peculiarity dictates the way the world turns. Nothing is as it seems, and strange, wonderful creatures populate the circus-like setting in delirious numbers. An endearingly sweet, innocent 10-year-old girl named Chihiro becomes trapped in this swirling place after her parents take a wrong turn and wind up crashing their car in front of a mysterious tunnel in a clearing in the woods. In a bizarre scene, the parents are transformed into pigs when they consume a gluttonous meal served at what the father believes must be a theme park, leaving Chihiro to stumble upon a mystical bathhouse in her panicked state.

The frail girl meets a kind boy named Haku, who ostensibly appears as her guide through this scary land. She is warned of an irascible sorceress named Yubaba (Suzanne Pleshette), who is in charge of the bathhouse. Haku warns her that she must ask the old woman for a job, or else face the consequences of losing her identity. When she finally, diligently lands her menial work, Yubaba absorbs the words from her signature off the contract and renames her Sen.

One of the movie's most fascinating inventions is the creature Kamaji (David Ogden Stiers), who runs the boiler room with his aberrantly long, spindly arms that flail all around like a mad conductor doing too many tasks at once. He becomes Chihiro's friend, maintaining his harsh exterior while quickly warming to the child's gentle heart. His workspace is dirty and oppressive, and he commands loads of little dust creatures that scamper around carrying coal.

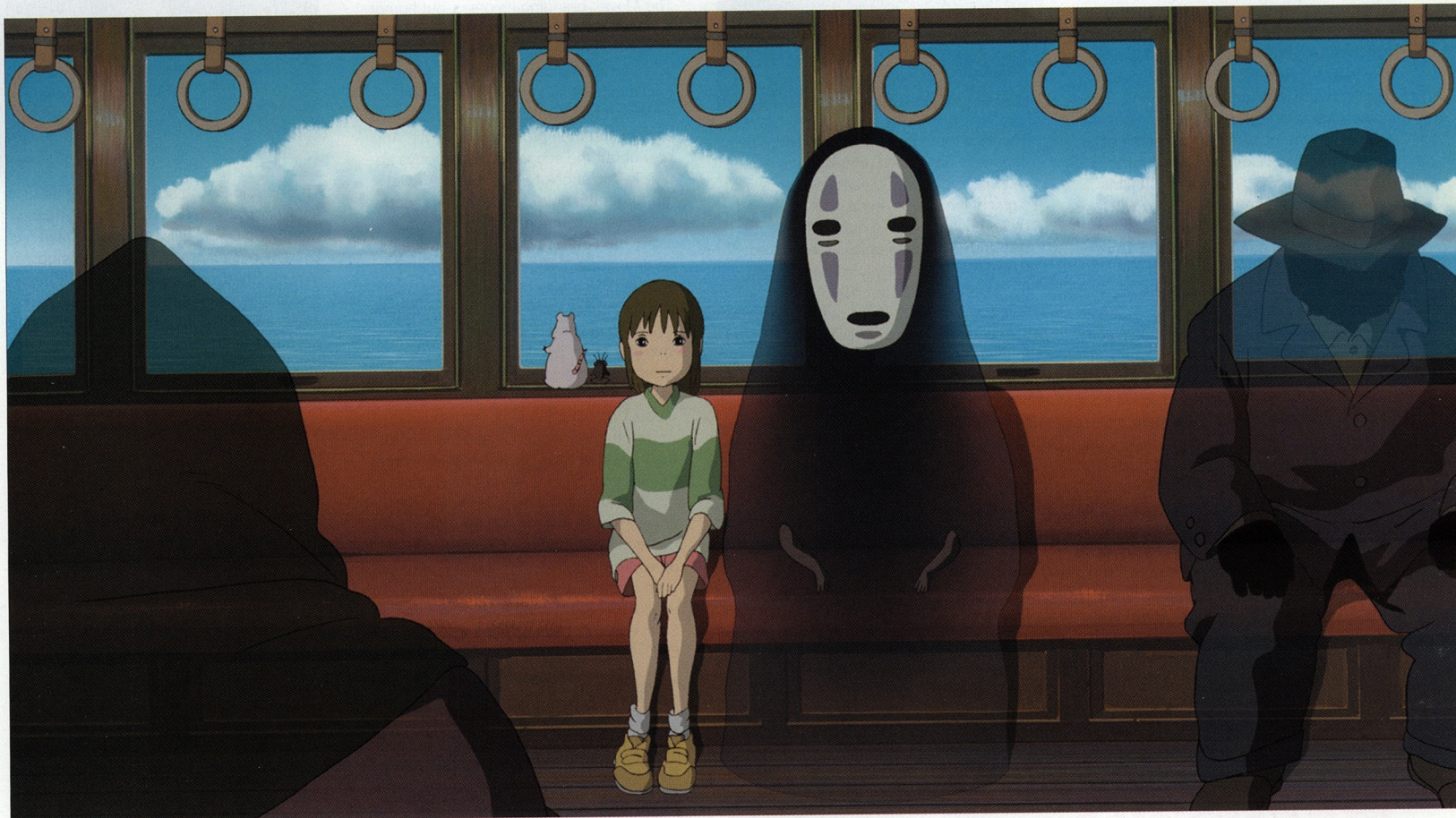
Chihiro's world is populated by marvelous sights and sounds, and unlike

typical Hollywood animation, scary, violent moments do occur. There is an amazing scene where a dragon is being mercilessly attacked by a swarm of tiny paper creatures, who slice the majestic creature to a bloody mess as it flees through the sky, eventually ending up badly injured at the feet of Chihiro. She has befriended the creature and, in a disturbing struggle, wrestles it into submission by violently clamping its mouth shut in an attempt to force-feed medicine. Chihiro had earlier acquired the healing herb from the enthralling River Spirit, a being tormented by the mountain of sludge and garbage it has absorbed from the polluted waters in which it dwells. In an intriguing scene, it is given dramatic release in a tidal wave of grime that spills forth from a hole in its side that was plugged by a giant bicycle.

One of my favorite visions in *Spirited Away* is the strange No Face, a wandering translucent ghost-like figure with an oval stage mask for a face and an enormous maw

that consumes even the living. It lurches throughout the city in a childlike confusion, somehow possessing the magic to spill gold at will from its giving hands, sending the bathhouse into a tizzy in greedy excitement. When it gets irritated and begins to ravish tons of food in a gluttonous rage, Chihiro, the unlikely hero yet again, leads to its benevolent removal from the city.

Spirited Away lacks the thematic gravity of Miyazaki's last marvel, *Princess Mononoke*, but the film is not meant to thrive on telling a cohesive, tidy story with undercurrents moving to spark provocative debate. It holds its message loosely and subtly, with simple dialogue that reveals only what it has to, freeing the remarkable images for boundless surrealism. Watching this modern-day, hypnotic fairy tale as a child must inspire such pure delight. Watching it as an adult reminds us what it was like to be that child, alive to the possibilities of a soaring imagination.



Extra features

If you've been an admirer of Mr. Miyazaki for some time now, you'll appreciate the extras contained on the DVD almost as much as the movie. Outside of the exhaustive rough storyboarding and voice-studio sessions, the invaluable draw here is the "Making of *Spirited Away*." In a rare treat, we get to see Miyazaki and his studio of animators intimately involved in the creation of *Spirited Away*, learning much about the director and gaining an even greater appreciation for his craft. The staff is seen taking turns making post-midnight meals, slaving through the early morning hours, researching scenes and getting a gentle but firm lecture from the fascinating director. It's the perfect cap on one of the year's best DVDs.

Castle in the Sky, Kiki's Delivery Service Disney/Buena Vista

Thanks to Pixar (*Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*) director John Lasseter's efforts to spearhead the eventual release of a large chunk of Miyazaki's canon of work, Disney will be bringing out other masterworks such as the magical *My Neighbor Totoro*, my personal favorite Miyazaki film. Meantime, with the release of *Spirited Away* comes the charming *Kiki's Delivery Service*, a gorgeously drawn film full of the typical wonder a Miyazaki production is guaranteed to hold. The story of a young witch and her talking cat was Studio

Ghibli's first major hit, and while nowhere near the accomplishment of their most recent work, the film is a delight.

Completing this faux trilogy, which can also be purchased in a box set, is *Castle in the Sky*, yet another lovely work that sits in second place as the best of the bunch. With more adult sensibilities and a richer animation style than *Kiki*, *Castle in the Sky* is a more enjoyable, effecting experience. Do yourself a favor: pick them all up and discover your own personal favorite.



Kung Faux Comic Video Vol. 1

●●●●●

Tommy Boy

When I received the screener for *Kung Faux*, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that the case looked like Rockstar's media kit, so off came the security tape. Imagine my jubilation when I found old, crusty-ass kung fu movies lovingly rub-a-dubbed with hip-hop make overs, cool commercials and '70s cinematography...I about hit the floor. Oh yeah, you gotta get you some of this. *Kung Faux Comic Video Volume 1* consists of two classic kung fu films re-cut, re-scored and re-dubbed with crazy voice-overs, graffiti-style comic overlays, video game pacing and Tommy Boy hip-hop. And this stuff is funny, yo, like nobody's business. *Kung Faux* actually got its start on the web, made its way to Much Music USA (the only place for music videos) and now, obviously, for those who missed its underground ascension, onto DVD. Where it goes from here is anyone's guess. Personally, I'd love to see them go until they run dry on cheesy kung fu, because comedy and hip-hop go together like heavy metal and mascara. If ever you decide to abuse any substance (you know, like Nyquil or Theraflu), I guarantee this DVD will induce gut-splitting laughter (and if you're not careful, the dreaded nose spray). It's also the perfect background video for those chaperoned parties, and a great way to break the ice if you're tryin' to get with some fine young lady. For more on *Kung Faux* and loads of content way too cool for the average human, check out heavy.com.



Gamera: Guardian of the Universe

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ADV Films



There's a lot to be said for tradition. The Japanese have been remaking the same monster movie for 50 years and show no signs of innovation, even in an age ruled by technology. No—the art of the rubber-suit-and-miniatures epic is too revered to mess with, so they just keep making them better and better. 1995's *Gamera: Guardian of the Universe* has all the usual suspects: the teen girl mysteriously linked to the monster, a pair of young, bold scientists (one male, one female) who just know the monster is good, a skeptical government official bent on unleashing the fury of every tank and missile in Japan although none will score a direct hit, a dim-witted detective for comic relief and of course a rival monster bent on killing the good one. You've also got to give it up for the "good" monster who always walks directly through downtown the first time it comes ashore. If it's smart enough to know it's "good," how can it not know mass destruction is bad? This is also where it will incite battle, making sure to fall backwards at least twice, mashing entire city blocks. Thankfully, it only takes the better part of a day to completely evacuate Japan. Nevertheless, this art form is alive and well, as evidenced by this film's stellar miniatures, quality monster suits and ingenious homegrown effects. I would love to see one of these filmmakers turned loose with a multi-million-dollar budget. This type of handmade filmmaking is vastly underrated.

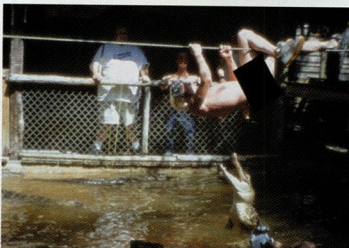
Within the extras on the DVD we get a firsthand look at how it's done: fascinating stuff, simple yet effective. See the man eating noodles; suddenly you hear a mighty roar! He looks up in astonishment; the camera turns quickly to the monster and then snaps back just in time to catch the single bowl of noodles hitting the ground. That's all the set-up they need and then it's cue the wire works and smoke machine...I love it. I have to mention though, on the DVD case, one of the quotes exclaims, "the computer graphics are outstanding!" Er...sorry, brother, but there's no CG happening here. Maybe 10 seconds' worth on some missiles, otherwise it's all man-made. That's pretty funny.

Jackass

●●●●●

MTV Films, Paramount

Self-important critics were unable to give in to the stupid pleasures of *Jackass: The Movie*, branding its gross-out humor as toxic. Guess some people don't like to laugh at host Johnny Knoxville and screwed-up friends' adventures to such exotic locales as the sushi restaurant where professional clown Steve-O snorts wasabi and then proceeds to vomit. And how about the scene where the boys apply electric shock to their balls. And let's not forget the golf-cart destruction derby, the bowel movements in a hardware store, the tightrope suspension above a pit of snapping alligators, and on and on and on. The movie brings me to tears, and the reasons are quite simple: watching these jackasses perform outrageous stunts is crazy fun. Half the time you wonder how they've escaped with their lives, the other half you're wincing at the disgusting nature of it all, and you love to watch every torturous second. I hate the low-brow teen comedies that pollute the summer big screen, yet this "reality" humor packs a morbid charm and energy that doesn't let up, and despite the arguments to the contrary, it comes off weirdly inspired; not just anyone can grab a camera and pull this off. If you liked it in the theaters, prepare for almost 30 minutes of additional inanities on the DVD. Come on, seriously, give in.



Red Dwarf Series 1 & 2

●●●●●

BBC Video, Warner Bros.



This classic British sci-fi comedy has finally come to DVD in all its smeg-tastic glory. *Red Dwarf* tells the tale of Dave Lister (Craig Charles), the curry-loving, slovenly third-rate technician of the deep space mining ship Red Dwarf. Put in stasis as punishment for having an illegal cat in his quarters, he emerges to find not only the entire crew dead ("Everybody's dead, Dave"), but also that 3 million years have passed. But he is not alone. The ship's computer has switched on the hologram of his interminable and now deceased bunk-mate Rimmer (Chris Barrie), and Lister finds that his illegal cat has evolved into a super-vain humanoid (Danny John-Jules). This is but the starting point of this hilarious and clever series, which mixes the literary wit and surrealism of *The Young Ones* and *Monty Python* with some terrific sci-fi premises. A classic example of this is *Series 1's* Future Echoes, wherein traveling at light speed causes bits of the future to creep into the present aboard Red Dwarf, and there is this fantastic scene between Lister and Rimmer where they carry on two separate conversations in two different time frames with highly humorous results.

Fans of the series will get a big kick out of these DVDs, which are packed with extras. *Series 1* includes cast commentary on all episodes, with a special commentary on Episode 1 by series' creators, along with outtakes (Smeg-ups), deleted scenes, raw effects footage, and most hilariously of all, the Japanese version of Episode 1. *Series 2* includes much of the same sans the Japanese episode, but adds a great interview with Doug Naylor and Paul Jackson about the genesis of the series, along with audio book chapters and trading cards.

Cowboy Bebop The Movie

In Theatres Now

Destination Films/IDP

words dave halverson



Every frame of this film exudes an atmosphere of pure style

Cowboy Bebop manufactures cool. Every second it's burned on to the screen it emits something...cool. You have only to give yourself over to it, if you haven't already. After mentally inhaling every frame of the anime series—which boasts the single best ending of all time—I thought the series had Be'd its last bop, so when I got wind of the movie...mmm, that's a bonus.

The film—obviously afforded a larger budget and therefore better animation (although *Bebop* remains one of the best-animated TV series ever)—acts as a side story to the exploits of Jet, Spike, Faye, Ed and Ein: the crew of the *Bebop*. Jet “The Black Dog,” who once served as a police officer until an incident left him part cyborg, is the thinker of the crew, while Spike, lover of all things Bruce Lee and rumored to have once been involved with the Red Dragon Syndicate, acts purely on instinct. The two Cowboys (bounty hunters) set out together originally, picking up Ein, the Welsh Corgi data dog, Faye, God's gift to men and chronic gambler, and Ed (or Radical Edward), a crazy tomboy genius hacker, along the way. Between bounties, they all get on each other's nerves, eat noodles, and dream about protein. I highly recommend experiencing all of this for yourself on DVD.

The movie is an amazing ride, although because of its date with the mainstream (or, at least, brush with it), it's not quite as slick as the anime series. For one thing, you don't get what is perhaps the coolest opening ever created—a hip '70s noir-style dance of silhouettes, bass, and saxophones—and for another, the soundtrack is

largely generic in comparison to the series' edgy jazz. Nevertheless, *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* still stands as one of the finest entertainment venues on the planet, so make the effort to catch it in its limited theatrical release (which began April 4) or on DVD later this summer.

The eerily timely story—which involves bio-terrorism and a possible viral threat to the entire planet—takes place on Mars, A.D. 2071, after Faye, unbeknownst to her, witnesses a cataclysmic event. Out on a paltry bounty (after making a quick stop at the track), she finds her perp to be a dark stranger cloaked in black. As he nonchalantly walks away from the tanker he liberated earlier that day, it explodes in a fiery cloud, unleashing its deadly fury on Alba city, killing more than 500. Faye, of course, thinks nothing of it and motors back to the *Bebop*.

Subsequently, the Martian government issues a W300,000,000 reward for the man's capture, which of course prompts Jet and Spike to begin pursuing the case. While the set-up may be somewhat passé, what follows is anything but.

Animation affords shots and situations live action can only dream of, and the producers of *Cowboy Bebop* know this. The entire film is presented as a continuous stream of art, framing bone-chilling peril in a cushion of urban beauty. As Spike and Faye spiral deeper and deeper into what becomes a web of political and military intrigue, their own mortality and the fate of Mars hang in the balance. Required viewing without a doubt.



Atlantic

Linkin Park

Meteora

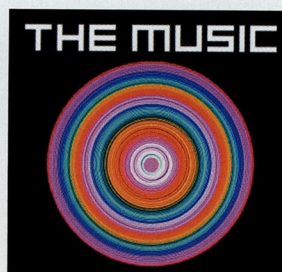
"Don't turn your back on me, I won't be ignored / you're gonna listen to me, like it or not / right now!"

Linkin Park doesn't ask you to listen to their sophomore firestorm *Meteora*; they demand it, and you don't just listen, you feel it rattle in the core of your belly. Chester Benington wails with such earth-shattering conviction that you simply must submit to the bristling power. And yet his vocals, despite their ferocity, command infectious melodies. Strike in the punch of razor-sharp production and you have an album that is absolutely explosive.

The songs get started by shaking your teeth and then move quickly to shatter your skull. Guitars couldn't hit any harder. The beats couldn't bounce any stronger. The sonics couldn't be any more infectious. And around all this exists a core of tunefulness that, as simple as it sometimes can be, makes the music so endlessly listenable.

The formula hasn't been tampered with much since their first effort, simply refined and honed with more interesting samples and better structure. The band continue to drop their energy without the typical misogynistic sludge and strains of cursing. What, a popular band that doesn't pull you down? It's part of their vibe, a group of immense talents who can get pissed and show it yet keep themselves in check. The needle isn't always threatening to shatter their careers in a soiled pool of depression, but that doesn't mean that life doesn't feel off sometimes. On "Easier to Run," the hurt is exposed around massive guitar chords: "It's so much easier to run/Replacing this pain with something numb." It's a bit grade-school poetry at times, yet always earnest. They make you believe what they say has conviction, even when the words are mostly a service to the music and delivery.

So what do these wildly successful boys have to be upset about? The same things you and I do. Sometimes you just want to scream at the world. Some times you feel alienated and fed up. But this isn't your typical rock angst. The band twists such



Capitol

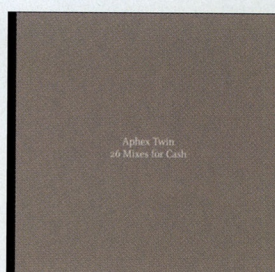
The Music

The Music

Combine equal parts Budgie and vintage Rush, add a dose of neo-metal (along with a hook from Bono here and a Vince Neil howl there), and you've got *The Music*, the best thing to knock on rock's door since VAST. The first time I caught the "Take the Long Road and Walk It" video (which is featured on the enhanced CD) on Much Music (gratuitous plug, that), I was halfway to Tower before they cued the next video. Although Robert Harvey's distinct and soaring voice is the archetype that can make the difference between success and obscurity, it only serves as a layer, complimenting tracks that sound anything but generic. Theirs is the thick, original sound of a band with complete dominion over their instruments and songwriting—of which the vocals are a part of, not a commercial for. Their debut is the kind you can loop, discovering more with each passing take. It can be powerful ("Take the Long Road and Walk It"), rhythmic ("The Truth is No Words") on which the guitar channels Hendrix, subtle ("Human"), dysfunctional ("The Dance") and progressive ("Turn Out the Light," "Too high") but it's always compelling. —DH

gorgeous hooks into their sonic booms that anger is the last thing that seems to move Linkin Park. Sometimes it's cathartic to scream until your face is about to pop, and every song on the album becomes this tightly wound platform.

There's a hit here around every turn. Maybe it's all a bit calculated and specifically technical, but the pungent mix of genre sounds is just so damn fun to listen to. If "Nobody's Listening" doesn't get your body moving and your eyes closing to the hypnotic energy, you're flatlined. Benington's vocals splash around coiled beats and the perfectly infectious rapping of Mike Shinoda, pinned together by slickly moody Japanese flute samples. At 37 minutes, the album comes in lean and mean. Every song has a hook you can't ignore. And you won't. —BF

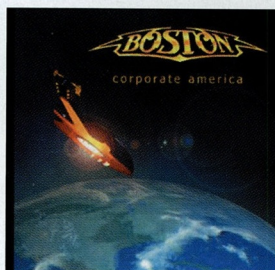


Warp Records

Aphex Twin

26 Mixes for Cash

Genius, insane knob twiddler, modern-day Mozart. Aphex Twin (aka Richard D. James) has been called all these things, and on his latest release, *26 Mixes For Cash*, he proves nearly all of these descriptions correct as he unleashes a scattershot of old and new remix work from the likes of Philip Glass, Nine Inch Nails, Nobukazu Takemura, and Meat Beat Manifesto. As always, his unique electronic sensibilities flow forth with its complexity and gorgeous, metallic atmosphere. —MH



Artemis Records

Boston

Corporate America

Old-school rockers who might happen by the new Boston CD and recall good times hitting the bong and trying to score, keep walking. Boston has become card-carrying tree-huggers, belting out church tunes like Winger on Nyquil. On *Corporate America* they proclaim their love for veganism, conserving fuel, avoiding animal products and "shooting with cameras, not guns." Oh yeah, these folks have lost it. Hey, I eat organic meat and use my recycle bin, but these are the kinds of dopes that don't mow the lawn for fear of upsetting lawn mites. Of course, all of this righteousness pours through their music, making it as unpalatable as dinner on Fear Factor. Some retro bands are better seen than heard. Boston is better not seen or heard, thus bringing them full circle to the phrase "Don't Look Back." —DH



Sony Music Imports

Japan For Sale

Vol. 3

Japan For Sale Volume 3 starts hinting towards being as cool as Vol. 2 with the beginning of track four, Loop Junkton's DJ Bass, which ultimately segues into more J-rap...not a good trend. Japan is too cool to rap. This is one American trend they need to let lay. We're thugs, we need to rap; Japan is happy and bright, let's keep it that way. The next thing you know they'll be chopping Hondas and popping caps. Beyond V3's hip-hops-that-don't lies yet another must-have mix of J-pop and rock, jazz and electronica. You just have to wait until track five to get to it. From there, Guitar Vader's "Super Brothers" (from Jet Set Radio Future) begins the parade. Mai Hoshimura's "Stay With You" and Mayu Kitaki's "Latata" bubble with the kind of ticklish Japanese pop that could cheer up a Dogtown mailman. The Brilliant Green prove they need to book a flight to America with "I'm a Player in T.V Games" (can I be your agent?) and Kyoto Jazz Massive's "Substream" sounds like something out of Sonic CD. Yoshinori Sunahara drives us home with a neo-Tokyo instrumental "Spiral Never Before," then it's time to start pining for Volume 4. —DH

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Sony has once again upped the ante with their 16:9 Plasma WEGA televisions. Introducing the new XBR series: not only are they bigger, they're equipped with excellent features that make them some of the best plasmas on the market. With a native resolution of 1365 X 768, the KE-50XBR900 is capable of displaying every common analog TV and HDTV format: 480i, 480p, 720p, and 1080i. Another key feature is the proprietary WEGA Engine. This engine not only delivers superb picture quality from any video source, it also minimizes the number of digital-to-analog conversion processes. This all-digital processing system

displayed some of the brightest and most brilliant images of any plasma screen out there. For system integration, the KE-50XBR900 offers three composite inputs, three S-Video, two component inputs and two RFs. You're out of luck if you want to use this monitor with a computer since it lacks a VGA input and the necessary scaling for computer signals. However, the coolest feature of the KE-50XBR900 is the Floating Panel Design. Encasing the plasma TV itself, it gives the illusion of the screen floating in air. Don't take our word for it. See it for yourself. Trust us, you'll be blown away.



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www.palm.com
\$550

Just when we thought we'd seen the last of the cool Palm products, they pull out this wonder. Introducing the Palm Tungsten W, a wickedly cool handheld device that combines wireless email and phone functionality into one slick package. Under the hood is a fast Motorola Dragonball VZ processor running at 33Mhz. Throw in 16MB of RAM and every application boots up in a hurry. The genius five-way navigator gives easy access to all of your programs and the best part is, you can do it all with one hand. And since the Tungsten W is Tri-band (900/1800/1900 MHz), you can use this puppy around the world. Utilizing AT&T's brand new GSM/GPRS network, you're surfing and sending email at the fastest data speeds possible. Not only can you send and reply to emails on the fly, you can also send SMS messages as well—so when you're overseas, you can still vote for your favorite American Idol. Combined with a 320 X 320 display that supports more than 65,000 colors, the Tungsten W may make your forget about Pocket PCs.



Living room PC

Alienware Navigator Extreme

www.alienware.com
\$2,899



At this year's Consumer Electronics Show, one of the main focuses was PC convergence—namely, how do you combine all the cool stuff we like about PCs—games, MP3s and video—and watch them from your sofa? With plasma and LCD TVs becoming more readily available, PCs are slowly making their way into the living room. Forgoing their typical PC tower used for their other models, Alienware's latest comes in a much smaller (and cooler) form factor. Measuring a mere 7.4 by 7.9 by 11.8 inches, the Navigator Extreme looks more at home in your enter-

tainment center than your office. Powered by a 3.06GHz Intel Pentium 4 Processor, 1 GB DDR SDRAM PC-2700 and a not too shabby NVIDIA Ti 4600 128MB graphics card, the Navigator Extreme lets you surf the web, watch movies, listen to MP3s and play pretty much any game you want. And more importantly, anywhere you want. Coupled with a 180GB hard drive and built-in TV-tuner, you can even record your favorite TV shows—TiVo style. Toss in a multi-function remote, and you won't be leaving home anytime soon.

A HOTROD WITHOUT AN ENGINE...



www.pelicanacc.com

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